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## The Varsity Theater: A case study of the one-screen locally-owned movie theater business in Iowa

Mohammad Sadegh Foghani

*Iowa State University*

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**The Varsity Theater:**  
**A case study of the one-screen locally-owned movie theater business in Iowa**

By

**Mohammad Sadegh Foghani**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: History

Program of Study Committee:  
Amy Bix, Major Professor  
Charles M. Dobbs  
Leland A. Poague

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2012

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### 1.1. The Nickelodeons and the Prestigious Movie Palaces

The first theater in the United States built exclusively for the purpose of showing moving pictures opened on 19 June 1905 in Pittsburgh, with the capacity of 96 seats. The owners charged moviegoers only a nickel, which resulted in the popularization of the term *nickelodeon*, an English word of Greek origin. Similar movie houses soon opened in other cities around the nation. Modern historians have referred to the entire period from about 1905 to the mid-1910s as the *Nickelodeon Era*, characterized as a time when movie houses became the community centers for all Americans, particularly for poor urban residents.<sup>1</sup> The nickelodeon movie houses soon attracted a sizeable pool of moviegoers, mostly working class and immigrant men and women, thanks to the affordable cost of admission. Also, since the movies were silent, language did not deter non-English speakers from enjoying the entertainment.<sup>2</sup>

The growing popularity of this new institution was accompanied by the rise of social concerns, which made moviegoing a controversial matter rather than a mere leisure activity. Some observers applauded the arrival of nickelodeons, considering them almost a modern

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<sup>1</sup> The Nickelodeon Era's end is indeed a debatable matter among film historians. The emergence of prominent American films such as *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915, the opening of the prestigious Strand Theater in New York City in 1914, the ascent of once-secondary vaudeville theaters in 1912, or even the opening of William Fox's elegant Dewey Theater in Manhattan in 1908, could all be associated with the closing of the Nickelodeon Era. Fuller, Kathryn H. *At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001, 47.

<sup>2</sup> Cousins, Mark. *Widescreen: Watching. Real. People. Elsewhere*. London: Wallflower Press, 2008, 32.

“community center and conqueror of the saloon,” entertaining the whole family with more wholesome diversions than liquor. But soon other Americans, especially reformists and upper-class elite groups, began denouncing the movie theater as a potentially-dangerous institution; observers worried that the movie business violated moral norms of society, brought about unwanted social behaviors, and risked sexual and ethical damage to moviegoers, in particular to children and uneducated adults. Critics saw the nickelodeon movie houses as “a school for scandal teaching adolescent boys to steal and girls to be promiscuous,” which promoted “delinquency among boys and sexual immorality among girls” and endangered “the safety and socialization of children.” Critics, too, disapproved of the “darkness in storefront theaters,” for it was a provoking cover for inappropriate adult behavior in theaters in their eyes. They also did not welcome the ability of a moving image to induce fantasies and implant unrealistic expectations and ideas in moviegoers’ minds, reinforcing the nickname for movie theaters as the “house of dreams.” Since many films depicted crime and violence, critics expressed concerns over the supposedly growing trend of imitation of movie crimes by children. They also worried that movies could give false expectations to immigrant children of the kind of life they could have in America. Critics feared that films would have a negative impact on adult immigrants as well as younger viewers; such a debate reflected a broader social reality of the time, the issue of *class*. For instance, reformists were concerned that some movies could induce what they called dangerous ideas into immigrants’ minds, such as encouraging a “workers’ strikes.”<sup>3</sup>

Despite the initial social stigma and social doubts, movie theatres soon became a highly visible part of the American town, and motion pictures became a well-established mass

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<sup>3</sup> Butsch, Richard. *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 139, 151-156.

entertainment medium. In 1906, an Australian company released the world's first feature film, *The Story of Kelly Gang*, longer than the short films produced earlier and meant to be the centerpiece of attention, rather than a supplement to other amusements. Four years later, the United States boasted about 10,000 movie houses of various size and attractiveness, which attracted more than a quarter of the American population to attend the movies on a regular basis each week.<sup>4</sup>

From the architectural perspective, nickelodeon movie theaters did not establish a consistent architectural trend since they were started “in anything from remodeled stores, older existing opera houses and town halls, spaces cordoned off by curtains or temporary walls in hotels, candy shops or barrooms, newly built theater structures, and even rehabilitated livery stables.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the architectural design and interior decorations of early movie houses did not really matter to moviegoers, but the motion picture itself with its novelty and mysteriousness was inherently compelling; the fact that an *image* could *move*.

However, this gradually changed in the following years as the movie theater itself evolved; since the opening of the first nickelodeon movie theaters in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, theaters passed through three major eras of architectural design. The first generation of movie theaters, rapidly developing from the basic nickelodeon format, were the prestigious “movie palaces of the 1910s and 1920s.”<sup>6</sup> The construction of these ornate, sumptuous movie theaters during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century coincided with the establishment of

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<sup>4</sup> Gorman, Lyn and David McLean. *Media and Society into the 21st Century: A Historical Introduction*. Chichester, UK ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, 30.

<sup>5</sup> Fuller, Kathryn H. *At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001, 48.

<sup>6</sup> Cousins, *Widescreen*, 32.

the fundamental principles of the film industry, ranging from advances in narrative and the creation of genre to the popularization of the star system. During the period before and after World War I, influential director D.W. Griffith rose to prominence for his powerful dramatization of contemporary social issues such as “labor-management conflict, white slavery, eugenics, prohibition, women’s emancipation, and civic corruption.”<sup>7</sup> Such themes were rooted in his powerful historical and political vision, and soon created a new language for the film. Griffith created over 400 films, including his well-known 1915 epic, *Birth of a Nation*, which “became the most widely acclaimed and financially successful film of the entire silent era” and “grossed more than \$13 million, more than any other film before 1934.” Also during this era, audiences started to look upon actors more as public personalities and as brand names for the quality of films. The first two decades of the twentieth century also witnessed the first wave of monopoly consolidation in the film industry; in 1908 Thomas Edison formed the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) to gain control over film production, distribution and exhibition. The MPPC was later dissolved by the federal courts in 1915, but it had a permanent impact on the film industry as film production gradually shifted westward to the Southern California region and started to revolve around a town called Hollywood. By the early 1920s, Hollywood became the American film heartland, and moviemakers appreciated its “sunny climate for outside filming,” “space for expansion,” “geographical variety,” and a massive number of “non-unionized labors” in the area. Yet despite the westward shift of the industry, film companies still kept their headquarters in New

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<sup>7</sup> Belton, *Movies and Mass Culture*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996, 26.



York and remained financially dependent on Wall Street banks. With the advent of the expensive talkies in 1927 and the arrival of the Great Depression in 1929, the industry still needed outside support to stand on its own feet economically.<sup>8 9</sup>

## **1.2. The Art Deco Style, Drive-Ins and First Multiplexes**

The Depression era brought the second architectural trend in movie-theater design, construction of the simpler, less spacious “modernist art deco theaters” which reflected the economic and social circumstance prevailing through the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, opportunistic entrepreneurs and the American business sector realized the profit-making potential of the film industry. But intense competition and monopolistic practices continued to characterize the moving picture industry. By 1920, after the MPPC’s dissolution, the second wave of monopoly arrived, this time with far more long-standing and larger impact. Over the following years, the film business became an oligopoly, characterized by vertical integration and long-term employment contracts. Hollywood studios imposed on theaters nationwide the requirement that they purchase a certain package of inferior-quality films alongside guaranteed big hits, a practice known as block-booking. That pattern meant that, often, theaters owners were not even able to see the pictures beforehand (blind-bidding). Such tactics guaranteed domination over the market until the late 1940s by five major film studios, the “Big Five” (Paramount Pictures, 20th Century Fox, Warner Bros., Loews Inc./Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO)) and, to a lesser degree, by

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<sup>8</sup> Gorman and McLean, *Media and Society*, 31-34.

<sup>9</sup> Belton. *Movies and Mass Culture*, 6, 31, 45.

<sup>10</sup> Cousins, *Widescreen*, 32.

the “Little Three” (Universal Pictures, Columbia Pictures and United Artists) As film historians have pointed out, the term *studio* is misleading during this era of American cinema history, for studios were not only involved in the production process, but also in distribution and exhibition (with the exception of United Artists, which was more involved in the distribution of other smaller companies’ productions). On the one hand, these eight studios pushed the independent exhibitors as well as producers to the economic margin. On the other hand, the age of studio dominance brought about the most economically-successful era of American film industry; sometimes called the *Golden Age of Hollywood*. During the 1930s and 1940s, these eight major Hollywood Studios not only produced about three-quarters of all American feature films, but also accounted for ninety-five percent of exhibition investment in the United States, since the studios directly owned about 2,600 movie houses in major American cities. A first run theater that was owned by a Big Five studio would allocate between forty to sixty percent of its screening to the studio’s own productions, dividing the rest of its showings to the blockbusters turned out by the other four companies.<sup>11</sup>

However, the fifties began on a dark note for Hollywood. By the early 1960s, the American movie theater business had already lost half of its audiences, in comparison to the golden days of the 1940s. Indeed, the post-World War II period proved a frustrating time for the American film industry and in particular for the Big Five. All studios faced serious economic challenges and were all badly hit by postwar transitions in the industry. Two founding brothers of Warner Bros. sold their shares in 1956, Paramount posted a loss for the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

first time in its history in 1963, MGM was sold out to an investor in 1969 and left the distributing market in 1973, and 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox lost a record \$77 million in 1970. The worst hit studio was definitely RKO, which could not manage to survive and went out of business in the late 1950s.<sup>12</sup>

Some parts of the movie industry tried to react to the situation by deliberately going through major transformations and undertaking new strategies. However, in other instances, Hollywood had to merely surrender to the reality of market forces the major blow came from the government agencies, when the Paramount decision of 1948 put an end to the ownership of movie theaters by movie studios. The anti-trust legislation eradicated the preferential booking practices and marked the end of Hollywood's Golden Age. The divorce between production and exhibition shook the very basis of the studio system. Hollywood studios soon split their companies in the United States in half, to deal with production and exhibition separately. In the international market, however, studios hold onto their direct control over distribution channels.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, the post-war suburbanization phenomenon drastically changed the demographic distribution of moviegoers, as many people started to reside on the outskirts of cities. Consequently, moviegoing became more expensive and less convenient, as long as the first-run theaters were still located in older town-centers. Hollywood studios responded to the drastic decline in audiences by constructing theaters in suburban shopping malls which were

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<sup>12</sup> Nowell-Smith, Geoffrey, ed., *The Oxford History of World Cinema*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, 443, 450.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 445.

popping up all around the country during the 1960s and could provide moviegoers with free parking. Studios also started to build some 4,000 drive-in theaters in the outskirts of cities. In 1956, for the first time, more American moviegoers went to drive-ins than indoor theaters. Nonetheless, these remedies proved to be insufficient in the long term.<sup>14</sup>

Television, too, threatened to steal postwar audiences from movie theaters. However, it is important to bear in mind that television did not become a fully viable alternative to movie houses until the mid-1960s. Starting from the early 1950s, Hollywood studios started to open their doors to television. Small-scale studios initiated the process, and major studios soon joined the business trend. Columbia's 1951 collaboration with television was followed by RKO's selling of its library to television in 1954. All other major studios began producing for television in 1955 and released their pre-1948 titles to Television by 1956. Only a few years later, by 1960, Hollywood superseded New York and was the new heartland of television production. Although studio leaders had initially feared television as a threatening rival, they came to appreciate the new technology for profit-making potential. Nonetheless, while television introduced a new source of revenue to studios, it affected movie-going and reduced the number of moviegoers.<sup>15</sup>

Another strategy promoted by Hollywood studios to lure patrons back to theaters was capitalizing on technological advances in production. The idea of color technology had been around since before World War II, and in the 1930s, the Technicolor process was used color on a handful of epic films such as *Gone with the Wind* and the *Wizard of Oz*. However, due to

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 443.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 446.

market monopoly, it was not until the early 1960s that color films became the standard in the film industry. Even so, the expense and practical difficulties of setting up new systems proved discouraging. The Cinerama technique promoted enhancement through widescreen technology and multi-track studio sound, but installing it involved too many technical complications and proved too expensive for many exhibitors. The postwar period brought new interest in the idea of 3D technology, which had been around since the 1920s, but the fad never gained a permanent foothold. While Fox's CinemaScope and Paramount's VistaVision, both gained a relative success and were widely used in many theaters, both still required substantial investment to equip theaters, which cut into profit, from the new technology. Finally, the Panavision Company came up with the long-term solution to popularizing widescreen process system became the industry standard by the late 1960s.<sup>16</sup>

During the 1960s, studios also turned to new policies regarding recruitment of casts, censorship standards, and modes of film productions; studios of that era also made organizational and structural modifications. Loosening the long-term contracts with big stars, directors and producers paved the way for independent production. It also fostered the arrival of "auteur cinema," in which the director was the true author of the picture, which aimed to be more than just a formula-driven, Hollywood-based prescription. Reconsidering its censorship standards, Hollywood joined the age rating system in 1968, but as the last major country in the Western World. Moreover, while studios conservatively retained the tenets of the classical narrative style and story-telling, they welcomed new genres and less

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<sup>16</sup> Nowell-Smith, *Oxford History of World Cinema*, 445-446.

conventional themes, such as Sam Peckinpah's *The Deadly Companion* (1961) and Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964). Arthur Penn is perhaps the best director to epitomize the less formula-dependent genres of 1960, who claimed prominence with his "unusual western," *The Left Handed Gun*, in 1957, and became a well-established figure in Hollywood with *Bonnie and Clyde* ten years later in 1967. While the 1960s proved a frustrating period for studio leaders, their long experience in the film business helped. The era saw the emergence of some of the greatest American films, such as John Ford's, Howard Hawks's and Alfred Hitchcock's late epics, which helped the industry survive. On the bright side, smaller studios such as Columbia and Universal, which had been marginally profitable in previous decades, proved more flexible in adapting to the changing pattern of film industry in the 1950s and 1960s, as they made unprecedented profits during this period. Even Walt Disney Corporation, which had been around since the 1920s, developed its own distribution division in 1953, the Buena Vista Distribution Company.<sup>17</sup>

While the post-war period was a frustrating time for Hollywood, it witnessed the renaissance of foreign films. The dark days of Hollywood, in fact, coincided with the rise of commercially-successful European and Asian pictures. Although the emergence of non-Hollywood cinema in the United States could be traced back as far back as the 1920s, the post war years brought a resurgence in the arrival of foreign productions in the United States. Hollywood studios, struggling to survive the challenge of domestic threats such as suburbanization, television and anti-trust legislation, now had to compete with films of

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 450-460.

foreign auteurs. International films “departed more or less from Hollywood narrative norms.” They were produced in a different way and with more openness, were pictures that “encompassed a range of styles, genres and modes of production...that were typically made with the support of government subsidies and with international distribution in mind.” Nonetheless, once the foreign film market’s appeal for American audiences became evident and once art films began to carve out a market, Hollywood eventually started to pay more attention to the art film, both in terms of distribution and production. The spark came from Roberto Rossellini’s epic resistance film, *Open City*; a low-budget Italian picture which was an unprecedented success soon after its first release in New York in 1946. *Open City* was the first Italian post-war picture and did a tremendous box-office business; it “broke the previous New York City records set by *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*.” It laid the foundation of foreign film culture after the war in America and created a growing market for art films which flourished until the late 1960s. The number of art houses in the United States jumped to 450 in 1963 from only a few in 1946. Fan magazines and popular periodicals such as the *New York Times* started devoting more space to reviewing foreign films and directors, foreign film festivals grew in number, and national film festivals or regional film events even began to devote dedicated sessions to foreign movies. Art centers and museums as well as academic institutions joined the growing trend by promoting and/or exhibiting foreign pictures.<sup>18</sup> More importantly, American audiences revealed a once-untapped appetite for foreign films. The audiences, according to a 1963 *Time* magazine article, were “young,

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<sup>18</sup> Balio, Tino. *The Foreign Film Renaissance on American Screens, 1946-1973*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010, 3-6.

mostly under thirty,” belonging to a “new generation [who believed] that an educated man must be cinemate as well as literate.”<sup>19</sup>

Although Hollywood remained the center of the American film industry after the war, New York was the art film market’s harbor. Getting good reviews from New York’s major film critics and journalists, and running in the Big Apple for a minimum of eight weeks, were the signs, if not preconditions, of a successful nationwide distribution. In fact, due to its diverse population, New York was not merely a financial platform for art films, but more importantly a significant *market*. “The Greater New York [area] could generate as much as half the total revenue for a film.”<sup>20</sup>

Among foreign films, Italian pictures such as *Open City* were the forerunners, but there were other major players too; most notably British, French, Japanese and Swedish movies. These four countries joined the trend of attracting significant American audiences and reinforced the art film market until its decline in the early 1970s. There were even smaller secondary players such as Russia and Poland. Sergei Bondarchuk’s 1956 masterpiece, *War and Peace*, proved to be the highest budget film (\$100,000,000) ever produced to that time. The postwar British film renaissance immediately accompanied its Italian counterparts, preceding the arrival of the French mainstream “Tradition of Quality” productions during the 1950s, while the latter set the stage for arrival of the rebellious, short-lived French New Wave Cinema in the early 1960s. Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* jump-started the Japanese films’ entry into the American market in 1951. However, “cultural differences,” “poor distribution”

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<sup>19</sup> *Time Magazine*. “A Religion of Film.” September 20, 1963

<sup>20</sup> Balio, *Foreign Film Renaissance*, 6.



and lack of an “effective marketing strategy” threatened to undermine the long-term success of Japanese production in the American market. By contrast, Swedish director Ingmar Bergman enjoyed a well-devised American distribution pattern and soon became a prominent international figure. He was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1960, won an Oscar for Best Foreign language Film in the same year and won another one in the following year. Born around the same time with the French New Wave, and influenced by the Free Cinema documentary movement, the British New Cinema became hugely popular with the American youth population by 1961. Italian cinema, like French and British trends, enjoyed a second wave hitting the art film market, thanks to the epic works of auteurs such as Antonioni, Fellini and Visconti, to Levine-Ponti collaborations and to the international renown of individual actors/actresses such as Sophia Loren. Indeed, “the second Italian renaissance was the most commercially successful trend of the 1960s.”<sup>21</sup>

Although foreign film distributors could not afford to spend lavishly on advertising, most foreign films enjoyed one advantage over their rival Hollywood productions in the American market. Despite the existence of separate levels of censorships within American film industry such as the Production Code Administration (PCA) and the Legion of Decency, foreign films did not have to fully comply with censorship codes, since they were more often screened in independent or local theaters. The big-screen censorship did impose some barriers (for instance, it prevented the New British Cinema- which had a reputation for its explicit language and scenes- from reaching a broader and more mainstream market), but in

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 9-13, 40, 44, 168.

general the foreign film market's success remained dependent on the extra openness. Later, the abolition of censorship codes manifested the true magnitude of such dependency. When the governmental censorship of films effectively was abolished in 1965 by the Supreme Court, the consequence was a new generation of Hollywood pictures with a new sort of bluntness and unprecedented openness. Scenes that had been categorized as illicit during the pre-Code period now lured youth to movie houses and transformed the composition of American moviegoers and so the motion picture shifted "from a mass family entertainment to a minority art form supported by young people." As Hollywood films grew bolder, foreign films now lost their major advantage over Hollywood films. Instead, what the abolition of censorship brought about was a deeper involvement of Hollywood studios in the film market. Hollywood studios had already been seriously involved in the distribution of art films as early as 1957 during the pre-code period. By 1964, they had pushed the majority of small-scale independent distributors out of competition, and had the upper hands along with two prominent independent companies, Walter Raede's Continental Distributing and Donald Rugoff's Cinema V. With the abolition of the censorship code after 1965, now those firms could produce films with sexual content and unprecedented frankness, like their foreign counterparts. Over the next decade, what had been initially a threat and rival to Hollywood mainstream market turned into an opportunity for Hollywood studios. However, by the early 1970s and soon after the initiation of a new national film rating system in 1968, Hollywood again lost interest in capitalizing in sexual content, out of a fear that it could cost studios the patronage of moviegoers under the age of seventeen. By contrast, art movie houses kept capitalizing on sex exploitation as the last remedy to help them survive. By 1973, what was left for art films was a *niche* market. In 1979 and with the development of two competing

distribution channels, television and home video, however, Hollywood studios regained an interest in the distribution of foreign films.<sup>22</sup>

From the rise of this art film market after the war, through the decline of foreign films in the early 1970s, the fate of an art film always remained in the hands of contemporary film critics, popular film magazines such as *Variety* and film festivals such as the New York Film Festival (founded in 1963). As for audiences, art film patrons usually relied on film reviews and word of mouth promotion, in comparison to regular moviegoers who put their faith in paid advertising. The language of non-English films, surprisingly, did not create a serious challenge for audiences, as subtitles proved sufficient to help audiences hurdle over the language barrier. However, dubbing a foreign film into English would help leverage a movie to expand its market beyond art houses.<sup>23</sup>

The last significant post-war phenomenon was the internationalization of the film medium, which became widespread during the 1960s. The mechanism of that internationalization would range from financing and coproductions, to the presence of film personnel with different nationalities in the same movies. On the one hand, the motion picture was, and still is, promoting national and cultural values. On the other hand, the growing trend of internationalization signaled the profit-making potential of an international market that could not be tapped by culturally-narrow pictures. One apt case study of this worldwide trend is seen in the history of filmmaking in Britain, which witnessed the transition from the patriotic movies of the WWII period to the emergence of “Mid-Atlantic

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 8, 13-15, 227-228, 279-280.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 15-21.

cinema” and the works of directors such as David Lean and Carol Reed, who were well-known for producing movies with both American and British crews. Britain’s postwar cinema featured depictions of everyday life and social issues of particularly the middle class, in movies such as Karel Reisz’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960). British stars such as Albert Finney soon delivered unprecedented performances that appealed to a wide variety of audiences during the mid-1950s and early 1960s.<sup>24</sup>

### 1.3. Multiplexes Become Dominant

After three decades of decline in film-going, and after President Ronald Reagan’s 1986 antitrust reforms, which allowed movie studios to own theaters again, American film studios started to rise during the mid-1970s along with the emergence of the third architectural trend of movie houses; *multiplexes*.<sup>25</sup> Alongside the decline of foreign film, the last quarter of the twentieth century witnessed unprecedented financial profit and new box-office records for mainstream Hollywood. The strategy of simultaneous nationwide distribution and exhibition- accelerated by the emergence of multiplexes- together with television advertising paved the way for the dominating presence of Hollywood. Moreover, films such as *Jaws* (1975) introduced a new profit-making opportunity for the film industry, i.e. “tie-in products such as clothing and toys”; Spielberg’s monster shark “became an instant artifact of commercial folklore.” Young audiences who had become the chief consumers of the new tie-in products, proved to be the main targeted audience for new special effect films and movies that were

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<sup>24</sup> Sklar, Robert. *A World History of Film*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2002, 407-408.

<sup>25</sup> Jordan, Chris. *Movies and the Reagan Presidency: Success and Ethics*. Westport: Praeger, 2003, 40.

based on “familiar comic books.” This era also witnessed the arrival of video cassette, laser disk, DVD, pay-per-view, and cable television movie channels, all of which gave birth to a new phenomenon; home video. By the early 1970s, the videocassette recorder had become a standard home appliance, and by 1990 more than two-thirds of American households had a video cassette recorder at home. People could now rent or purchase feature films on cassette and watch them at home. The rise of home video led production companies to lower their cassette prices, responding to high market demand. Walt Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* made more net profit from video sales than any film in history had made from theatrical distribution. The last quarter of the twentieth century also brought a new wave of conglomeration among different aspects of the film industry, ranging from software to hardware. The trend promoted more efficient production methods and more effective distribution and exhibition strategies, and eventually resulted in a new trend of industrial ownership that guaranteed the financial viability of studios. Hollywood companies that “had become subsidiaries of insurance companies and parking lots chains” in the 1960s were now acquired by “publishers and video equipment manufacturers,” often of foreign origin, such as Sony’s acquisition of Columbia Pictures in 1989. These revolutionary transformations, however, overshadowed the arrival of a new cinematic age in the 1970s. This short-lived era could be highlighted by masterpieces such as Coppola’s *“Godfather I”* (1974), Polanski’s *“Chinatown”* (1974) and Scorsese’s *“Taxi Driver”* (1976). Film historian Pauline Kael called this era of American film history, the “authentic Golden Age” and film scholar Robert Sklar

referred to it as the “mini-Golden Age”.<sup>26</sup> The 1970s also witnessed the growing interest in independent production. While the history of independent production is as long as history of Hollywood itself, it was not until the mid-1970s that production outside of the influence of the Hollywood system re-emerged and a new generation of *Hollywood-independent* filmmakers developed. The most notable independent production efforts can date back as early as the mid-1920s, led then by a group of smaller companies of the time, such as Mascot Pictures Corporation (founded in 1927), Tiffany (founded in 1921), Monogram Pictures (founded in 1924), Republic Pictures Corporation (founded in 1935) and Grand National (founded in 1936). Those firms, collectively known as *Poverty Row*, started to make movies of a “secondary or lesser nature,” known as *B-movies*. These pictures usually were intended as companion features of a main movie in theaters’ double bill programs. In terms of narrative and style, however, B-movies were often cheap westerns whose plots all tended to be rather alike in essence. The Mascot Company had contracts with actors John Wayne, Yakima Canutt and Joe Bonomo. Republic Pictures, “the most important and influential studio in the history of the B- movie,” had stars such as Gene Autry and Roy Rogers under contract. B movies were indeed produced by Hollywood major and minor studios as well. Once-minor companies such as Columbia and Universal had exclusive units for production of B-movies, as did the majors. The 1948 antitrust Paramount Case initiated the decline of double-bill feature at most theaters in the 1950s and so consequently many companies stopped producing B-movies. However theaters’ double features did not disappear

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<sup>26</sup> Sklar, *A World History of Film*. 426-430.

immediately and in fact, managed to survive through the 1960s, in particular in drive-in theaters. Also, production of films of lower quality, of course, did not go away, but ‘Poverty Row’ and B-movies as distinct classifications within the film industry were gone.<sup>27</sup> In the 1970s, the American film industry, nevertheless, experienced an authentic independent movement, accompanied by a “proliferation of North American film festivals” such as Robert Redford’s Sundance Film Festival in Utah, which opened in 1980. As with the spread of foreign art film showings in the 1960s, film festivals served as the launching platform for theatrical distribution of indies, which otherwise could not get a chance to go beyond non-theatrical distribution routes such as screening at art centers or on college campuses. Starting in the 1970s, even European producers and television networks welcomed American independent films, as did the domestic audiences to some extent. The urban black population was among the first to embrace the American indies, who found the works of African-American filmmakers such as Melvin Van Peebles and the correspondent “blaxploitation movement” appealing.<sup>28</sup> By the early 1990s, the entertainment-oriented Hollywood mainstream history was financially successful and globally popular, while on the other hand “artistry” was overshadowed, if not left out. “Commerce has overwhelmed art, which is why Hollywood movies aren’t as good as they used to be,” said Jeffrey Katzenberg, the chairman of Walt Disney Pictures, in 1992.<sup>29</sup> It was amid this bombardment of Hollywood products in

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<sup>27</sup> Slide, Anthony. *The New Historical Dictionary of the American Film Industry*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1998. 25, 43, 86, 123, 129, 161 173, 206, 217.

<sup>28</sup> Sklar, A *World History of Film*. 444-447.

<sup>29</sup> Maslin, Janet. “Film; Is a Cinematic New Wave Cresting?” *The New York Times*, December 13, 1992. Accessed November 10, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/12/13/movies/film-is-a-cinematic-new-wave-cresting.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>

1990s that the English-language art cinema “grew in prestige,” commanding a geographical scope well beyond the United States- including Canada, New Zealand and Australia and Britain. Although the independent film-making business was in a constant struggle with the Hollywood framework and was often not financially-competitive in comparison to mainstream productions, ironically, the indies’ presence among the nominees and winners of prestigious annual awards instilled hope in the film community. Even some critics regarded independent film-making as the “savior of industry,” which could once again balance out the entertainment and the artistry. The First major presence of independent films among the nominees and winners of the Academy Awards in 1993 was reinforced in the following years, and reached its peak in 1997 when four non-studio pictures were among the five best picture nominees.<sup>30 31</sup>

The independent film market that had flourished during the post-war period under the foreign film movement and had been reborn during the early 1970s had continued to gain

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<sup>30</sup> Sklar, *A World History of Film*, 486.

<sup>31</sup> In 1993, two independent co-productions of Japan and Britain, *Howard Ends*, 1992 and *The Crying Game*, 1993 were among the five nominees for best picture, competing with Universal Pictures’s “Scent of a Woman” starring Al Pacino, Warner Bros.’s “Unforgiven” starring Clint Eastwood (also director), Gene Hackman and Morgan Freeman, and Columbia Pictures’ *A Few Good Men* starring Tom Cruise, Jack Nickelson and Demi Moore. *Howard’s End* won three Oscars, out of its six nominations, while *The Crying Game*, 1992 won the best writing award, among its five nominations. The best picture award unexpectedly went to Clint Eastwood’s western-drama film.

*The Piano*, 1993 (best actress in leading role and best actress in a supporting actress) and Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*, 1994 (best writing and five other nominations) were other independent masterpieces of following years.

In 1997, four non-studio pictures were among the five best picture nominees; *The English Patient*, 1996 (9 wins and 3 other nominations), *Fargo*, 1996 (2 wins and five other nominations), *Secrets & Lies* (5 nominations) and *Shine* (1 win and 6 nominations). The British film, *The English Patient* won the best picture award. (IMDB. Accessed November 6, 2011. <http://www.imdb.com>)



strength in the 1990s. As the independent film sector became stronger through the 1990s, ironically its definition became increasingly vague and has remained fluid ever since. There is a variety of contributing factors that can be used to categorize a film as an *independent* or *Hollywood* film, including but not limited to budget size, main U.S. theatrical distributor, financing and production companies, presence of stars, filming location, genre, and of course director. Moreover, Hollywood has changed dramatically over the years. In the earlier decades and before Hollywood entered the foreign film market, smaller companies unaffiliated with Hollywood were often in charge of handling the distribution of art productions. However, today, major Hollywood studios have subsidiaries which specialize in independents and/or foreign films such as Paramount Classic, Fox Searchlight Pictures, and New Line Cinema of Warner Brothers. With the increase of international conglomerates, production circumstances have become even more complicated, and most films are produced with multiple companies today. For some film scholars, the question of independence would come down to when the distributor signed on; whether it was early enough to influence the picture or only after it was finished. At a broader level, the term *independent film* has come to mean, “At best, iconoclastic, adventurous moviemaking and a commitment to art over commerce. Not every independent art film [is] artful; nor, surely, [are] independent filmmakers the only ones concerned with art”.<sup>32</sup> Even within independent film-making, new sub-classifications have emerged. American independent filmmakers, as movie historian Robert Sklar would argue, would consider their works as independent rather than art, despite

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

the fact that their movies are screened across the country in movie theaters known as art houses. Sklar writes, “If art is a term that may connote elitism and specialized knowledge, independence is a concept central to the national ethos, indicating autonomy, self-reliance and freedom.”<sup>33</sup> Perhaps the term “cinema of outsiders,” as coined by film critic Emanuel Levy, would best describe what the American independent film movement has come to represent.<sup>34</sup>

Whether European independent or Hollywood mainstream, foreign art or American independent, low-budget or blockbuster, movies of the last quarter of the twentieth century were not screened in nickelodeons, movie palaces, or art deco theaters of past decades, but- for the most part- in multi-screen theaters of modern era; in *multiplexes*.

Although the “most well-publicized” and perhaps the first multi-screen movie house- a double-screen theater- was opened by AMC’s Stan Durwood in Kansas City in 1963,<sup>35</sup> the giant multiplexes did not start widely entering the public entertainment landscape until the 1980s. The third architectural trend of movie houses in the United States was indeed the massive construction of an industrial, lifeless first-generation of multiplexes, mostly in major suburbs. The first-generation of multiplexes was then followed by the emergence of more decorative, more prestigious, and stadium-size venues in the 1990s. That second wave of

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Levy, Emanuel. *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film*. New York City: NYU Press, 1999.

<sup>35</sup> Crouch, C. “The Many Births of the Multiplex.” *Cinelog*. June 27, 2009. Accessed November 25, 2011. <http://cinelog.org/cinelog/2009/06/27/the-many-births-of-the-multiplex/>

multiplexing was indeed a “postmodern” evocation of movie palaces of the 1910s and 1920s.<sup>36</sup>

Over the course of seven years, the total number of screens rose from 17,675 in 1980 to 23,555 in 1987 across the country, while by December 31, 2009, the number of screens jumped to 39,233 in the United States. In 1987, according to the National Association of Theater Owners, over forty-five per cent of screens were owned by the twenty largest theater chains in the country. In 2010, the four largest theater chains alone hold approximately the same share of the nation’s total movie theater market by owning 18,206, movie theaters nationwide.<sup>37 38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Acland, Charles R. *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes, and Global Cultures*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, 108-109.

<sup>37</sup> National Association of Theatre Owners. “Movie Theater Statistics.” Accessed November 13, 2011. <http://www.natoonline.org/statistics.htm>

<sup>38</sup> Blatt, Julius M. “Appraising the Multiplex Movie Theater.” *Appraisal Journal*, 2001, 509.

## **Chapter Two: A Case Study of Movie Entertainment in Des Moines, Iowa**

The Des Moines area in Iowa has witnessed the loss of many theaters since the golden days of Hollywood. More than forty once-existing theaters opened for business at some point during the twentieth century, only to vanish later; amidst a multi-faceted, complex competition between movie houses that took place in Des Moines as the national motion picture industry underwent huge transformations. Some theaters lasted longer than others. Some theaters lived only for a handful of years, while some others lasted for a couple of decades. As the overall life-span of theaters, more or less, shrank over the years, only one theater astonishingly managed to survive from the mid-1930s; the Varsity Theater.

Opened in 1935, the Varsity Theater was and remains a one-screen locally-owned theater in the Des Moines area. Today it competes for audiences with seven multiplexes (overall offering viewers 80 screens), one IMAX theater, and another locally-owned one-screen theater; back in 1935, the Varsity competed with fifteen one-screen theaters. Today, the Varsity is best known for showing American independent films, foreign-language movies, and documentaries, along with some mainstream films. By contrast, other theaters in town mostly, or exclusively, show Hollywood blockbusters.

My research in general discusses the history of the Des Moines Varsity Theater in the larger context of the movie theater business in that central Iowa area. In particular, my research focuses on the history of the Varsity's film screening, since film selection is a major factor with regard to the survival or demise of a locally-owned theater. Since there are other independent theaters like the Varsity around the country, this study does not suggest that the Varsity Theater is a *unique* theater in the United States or even in Iowa. But as a focused case-study, the history of the Varsity is worth exploring as a significant representation of the

history of American popular culture, the evolution of urban life, and the changing business of twentieth-century entertainment.

The Des Moines Varsity Theater represents an excellent illustration of the larger history of the movie-theater business, showing how that economic and social enterprise has changed, since the days of the first animated feature film in 1937, through the emergence of drive-in theaters during the mid-1950s, until today. The Varsity serves as a case study of the historical shifts and tensions between multiplexes and small theaters, and between corporately-owned chain theaters and locally-owned theaters. The Varsity's history shows how the owners of a small one-screen movie theater managed to survive the competition, not only with other locally-owned single or multi-screen theaters, but also against corporate-owned megaplexes in the city, even as the bigger movie industry underwent huge changes. The Varsity also reflects the history of how the movie business faced challenges in the second half of the twentieth-century with the development of television and other entertainment options, such as home video, the internet and DVDs.

Furthermore, since part of what has defined the Varsity's recent identity as a smaller locally-owned theater has been its focus on showing foreign and independent films, its long history also serves as the case study of non-Hollywood screening in the Des Moines area that expands on other historians' accounts of foreign film and independent movie viewing in U.S. theaters. Indeed, the evolution of the Varsity's film program and moviegoers together represents and reflects the character of Des Moines's (niche) market for unusual films.

My research questions are three fold and *not* mutually exclusive.

First, I examine the Varsity's film program since its inception, in particular with regard to other theaters' programs. The Varsity is well-known among today's mid-Iowa moviegoers

for screening a distinctive mix of films, remarkably different from mainstream exhibition patterns. Did the Varsity always devote a considerable portion of its movies to independent and art cinema or did it turn to unusual films in its long history? If the latter case is true, when did that happen, and what could be the possible explanation?

Previous studies, as mentioned in the introduction, attribute the decline of foreign films in the late 1960s to various reasons, such as the abolition of the Production Code and the rise of an American Independent film market.

Since the rise of multiplexes roughly coincided with the decline of foreign film in the United States, it is not implausible to hypothesize that Hollywood studios exploited the development of multiplexes as an exhibition leverage to defeat the already shaken foreign film market in the United States, thanks to the 1986 reforms.

Foreign films were mainly screened in art houses, which were independent small theaters. The Reagan's administration antitrust legislation passed in 1986 allowed studios to regain the upper hands in the ownership of theaters. That situation further promoted the expansion of chain multiplexes, which were already popular primarily among the suburban moviegoers and were pushing independent small central-city theaters out of business.

Scholars of movie-theater design have tended to assign a passive role to the architecture of movie houses and have focused on the influence of external factors such as economic conditions, sociocultural demographics, and urbanization on the development of architectural trends. However, it is valuable to consider ways in which architectural design, on its own part, may have affected the changing reception of motion film over the decades.

Since the 1980s, the Des Moines area in Iowa has witnessed the loss of many theaters—mostly uniplex, independent and locally-owned since the 1980s, as corporately-owned

multiplexes spread and then came to dominate movie showings in the Des Moines area. Of the thirteen one-screen theaters that existed in 1975 in the Des Moines area, twelve theaters vanished before the turn of the twenty-first century.<sup>39</sup> My second research question examines the impact of the emergence of multiplexes in the Des Moines on the film market in general and on the Varsity's film program in particular.

Lastly, this study examines whether and to what extent the Des Moines movie theater culture reflects the national trends. For instance, did the Des Moines area's film programs, and in particular the Varsity's, reflect the golden ages of foreign film screening in the mid-1960s?

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<sup>39</sup> In November 1975, the Des Moines area had thirteen theaters; Capri, Capitol Drive-In, Holiday, Ingersoll, Pioneer Drive-In, Plantation Drive-In, Plaza, River Hills, Riviera, South East 14th Street Drive-In, Theater 1536, Varsity and Wakonda.

### Chapter Three: The History of the Varsity Theater

In distinct contrast to the early twenty-first-century's standardized, corporate-controlled multiplex theaters, the Varsity Theater in Des Moines as of 2011 still presented customers with a different option, a more personalized and less pre-packaged tone. In particular, Bev Mahon, the man who owned and ran the Varsity for more than fifty years, had become a long-established figure in the city's cultural environment, familiar to several generations of movie-goers. He tenaciously held to a vision of what movie-goers should want and what the movie theater should be, running the Varsity to reflect those ideals long after the business around him had changed dramatically. Mahon died in 2009 at the age of 86,<sup>40</sup> but even after his loss, the Varsity remained in family hands. His daughter, Denise, continued to supervise the theater's daily operations personally (alongside her regular job as a nurse) and to this day remains in charge of the film selection process.<sup>41</sup>

The Varsity's future owner, Bev Mahon, was born in Omaha, Nebraska on October 21, 1922. His family owned a few theaters in Nebraska in the 1930s, until they moved to Monroe, Iowa, where Mahon grew up and reportedly became fascinated by movies at a young age.<sup>42</sup> Mahon got his start in the movie business as an usher. During the early 1940s, Mahon worked at the Strand Theater in the downtown area of Des Moines, which was the oldest theater in the city at the time. Part of his job at the Strand Theater was to "take a rickety cart up to a studio office, grabbing the film canisters, and making it back to the

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<sup>40</sup> Finney, Danniel P., and Hottle Molly. "Bev Mahon, 86, longtime Owner of D.M.'s Varsity Theater, Dies." *Des Moines Register*, March 29, 2009.

<sup>41</sup> Denise Mahon, interview by Author, June 17, 2011.

<sup>42</sup> "Obituaries," *The Des Moines Register*, March 30, 2009.



theater.” He also worked in a theater in New Sharon, Iowa.<sup>43</sup> After graduating in 1940 from Roosevelt High School in Des Moines,<sup>44</sup> Mahon studied film for a year at Stanford University, but did not complete college.<sup>45</sup> He served with the Air Force during the Second World War as a cryptographer with a B-29 outfit on Tinian Island.<sup>46</sup> Both before and after World War II, Mahon worked as a booker, for the Paramount Picture network.<sup>47</sup> As a booker, Mahon’s job was to serve as an intermediary between film companies and small theaters; bookers often represented many theaters and charged a fee for their negotiations with the film company to get a movie.<sup>48</sup> He also worked for the National Screen Service,<sup>49</sup> which was the major theatrical advertising company in the United States during this period.

After World War II, Mahon moved into the business of buying and running movie theaters in the Midwest. He owned and operated theaters in Pella and Sioux City, Iowa along with Omaha, Nebraska, before buying the Varsity.<sup>50</sup>

The Varsity Theatre in Des Moines had opened circa 1935, as a third-run, one-screen movie theatre that was independent and locally-owned. Through the 1940s and into the early 50s, during the height of the American movie business’s Golden Age, the Varsity

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<sup>43</sup> Cityview, “Declaration of Independents,” June 2, 2005.

<sup>44</sup> *Condolences for the Family of Bev C. Mahon*. 2009. Accessed October 15, 2011, [http://www.hamiltonsfuneralhome.com/services/condolence\\_view.aspx?sid=4911](http://www.hamiltonsfuneralhome.com/services/condolence_view.aspx?sid=4911)

<sup>45</sup> Denise Mahon, interview by Author.

<sup>46</sup> “Obituaries,” *The Des Moines Register*.

<sup>47</sup> Denise Mahon, interview by Author.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Finney, Danniell P., and Hottle Molly. “Bev Mahon, 86, longtime Owner of D.M.’s Varsity Theater, Dies.”

successfully operated six days a week and was showing different Hollywood double-features each night.<sup>51</sup>

Together with his business partner, Robert (Bob) Fridley, Mahon took over the ownership of the Varsity in 1954, adding it to the list of several theaters they owned in Iowa and Nebraska.<sup>52</sup> After their partnership dissolved in 1975,<sup>53</sup> Mahon devoted his time solely to the Varsity.<sup>54</sup> His daughter Denise Mahon recalled, “He always said to run one. And run it right. He’d rather do one than have multiple and stretch himself thin.” Mahon also converted the Varsity into a first-run theater shortly after the partnership dissolved.<sup>55</sup>

When Mahon took over the Varsity in 1954, American television ownership and viewership were rapidly expanding. The post-war trend of suburbanization, the baby boom and a nationwide housing shortage set the ground for the hasty growth of television in the United States. During the mid-1960s, when television became a viable option for most American families, the movie business declined in general and so did the Des Moines Varsity’s. Television attracted “great numbers of middle-class and working-class families away from the pleasures of the big city’s public sphere.”<sup>56</sup> Amusement was conveniently relocated to suburban private houses, cutting into the potential audiences of Des Moines’s

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<sup>51</sup> Wilke, Fritz. “Varsity Theater Breaking Away From the Silver Screen Mainstreams.” *Varsity Des Moines*. ca. 1989. Accessed October 15, 2011, [http://www.varsitydesmoines.com/varsity\\_dm\\_breakingaway\\_bmp.pdf](http://www.varsitydesmoines.com/varsity_dm_breakingaway_bmp.pdf)

<sup>52</sup> Bev Mahon, Interview by Arthur Orduna. *Where Quality Is King* (1993).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> It is not clear why the partnership ended. Denise Mahon said, “They just had differences on how they ran things.” Mahon, Denise, interview by Author. (June 17, 2011).

<sup>55</sup> Mahon, Denise, interview by Author.

<sup>56</sup> Edgerton, Gary, *The Columbia History of American Television*. Columbia University Press, 2009, 92-3.

theaters.<sup>57</sup> In particular, the popularity of television geared toward younger viewers competed with the Saturday Kiddie matinees that Mahon had regularly screened for children back then.<sup>58</sup>

During the late 1950s, Mahon tried to distinguish the Varsity from other commercial theatres in town by spending more money to improve the atmosphere of the theatre. To make the movie-going experience more comfortable, Mahon removed a hundred seats from the Varsity just to provide customers more room to stretch out.<sup>59</sup>

Over the years, Mahon's personality became a unique characteristic of the Varsity Theater and created a friendly atmosphere for his audiences. "He was a showman and a crowd pleaser."<sup>60</sup> He would personally welcome his customers before the show and thank them when they were leaving.<sup>61</sup> Mahon once said, "I'm like one of those old geezers who greet you at Wal-Mart."<sup>62</sup> His personality made the Varsity far more personal for audiences, compared to modern multiplexes where customers do not even know the theater's owner. This further helped Mahon to maintain a large group of loyal patrons, and his personal attention gave Mahon an awareness of his clientele that assisted him with his film selection.

Through her personal observations over the years, Denise Mahon suggests that the small Varsity Theater survived over recent decades by managing to attract a broad audience rather

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Randolph, Eric. "Varsity Still Charms After Busy 70 Years." *Des Moines Register*, December 25, 2008.

<sup>59</sup> Wilke, "Varsity Theater Breaking Away From the Silver Screen Mainstreams."

<sup>60</sup> Woody, Michael C. "Des Moines Less Lively with Loss of Mahon." *The Des Moines Register*, April 4, 2009: 12A.

<sup>61</sup> Mahon, Bev, interview by Arthur Orduna.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

than a narrow particular group of moviegoers.<sup>63</sup> People who moved to Des Moines from bigger cities came to realize that the Varsity showed the kind of movies they could see in art-centered harbors.<sup>64</sup> Since the Varsity was located directly across the street from Drake University, it benefitted from a regular student and academic audience. Specialized films, such as Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* shown at the Varsity in 2003, attracted a big turnout of younger people, mostly Drake students. "*Lost in Translation* we found people over fifty or sixty would walk out on it. With the younger people, I think we had the greatest amount of Drake Students for that Picture of any since I have been here", said Mahon.<sup>65</sup>

Convenience also contributed to attracting an audience, with the Varsity's centralized location near a popular university residential neighborhood contributing to its success and shaping the composition of customers. Indeed, Mahon suspected that the theater's location had defined its name, saying in 2007, "the original owners wanted a name that sounded collegiate for a movie theater located near a college campus."<sup>66</sup> However, the Varsity never became a mere student hangout spot, and its loyal clientele identified with the long-standing institution. In 1988, a group of long-time patrons decided to hold the "first annual party for Friends of the Varsity Theater."<sup>67</sup>

As a historic theater, the Varsity stood out from the recently-built modern multiplexes. In 1988, the Varsity was an "old-fashioned movie theater...a little worse for wear." The

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<sup>63</sup> Mahon, Denise, interview by Author.

<sup>64</sup> Mahon, Bev, interview by Arthur Orduna.

<sup>65</sup> Price, Patrick. "Varsity Theatre Celebrates 65 Years in Des Moines." *Ankeny Press Citizen*, March 12, 1993.

<sup>66</sup> Sesterhenn, Kit, "The Varsity Theater: A Campus Staple since 1938." *Times-Delphic*, November 8, 2007.

<sup>67</sup> Gammack, Julie. "There Are Theaters; Then There's the Varsity". November 4, 1988.

theater would get chilly on cold nights, and the Mahons placed buckets on the floor throughout the theater to fight a leaky ceiling.<sup>68</sup> While the Varsity had successfully managed to survive a fire incident that caused \$30,000 damage in 1958, in more recent years, it could hardly afford to renovate the theater.<sup>69</sup> But though the Varsity lacked high-tech glitz and superficial appeal, it had something that corporate chains did not: a well-known reputation among movie-goers in central Iowa for showing non-Hollywood films. In 1994, the *Des Moines Register* picked the Varsity as the “best place to see art/foreign films” in the region, editorializing, “this is a gimme. The Varsity is really the only place that offers these movies.”<sup>70</sup> Bev Mahon said in 2007, “I try to show different pictures instead of ones with car chases and buildings that are being blown up. I like to show pictures that have some sense of substance.”<sup>71</sup> Some popular articles about the Varsity theater’s history project this trend backwards, asserting that under Mahon’s direction, after 1954, the Varsity distinguished itself from its competitors by mainly showing foreign films, documentaries, and independent films.<sup>72</sup> Denise Mahon has also commented that over the years, Varsity’s patrons became more tolerant of unusual films and foreign movies with subtitles. The subtitled film *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) reportedly held the “concession stand record” at the Varsity, while Michael Moore’s controversial documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) turned out to be the Varsity’s biggest hit.<sup>73 74</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> “Fire Causes \$30,000 Along The Line Damage To Varsity.” *Times-Delphic*, January 31, 1958.

<sup>70</sup> “Here Are Our Awards For Local Movie Theaters.” *Des Moines Register*, April 14, 1994, 9D.

<sup>71</sup> Sesterhenn, Kit. “The Varsity Theater: A Campus Staple Since 1938.”

<sup>72</sup> To name a few; Randolph, Wilke and Price.

<sup>73</sup> *Cityview*, “Declaration of Independents.”

Throughout his ownership of the Varsity, it appears that Mahon handled most of the film selections himself, based on extensively reading scripts and recent reviews from premieres, film festivals and trade publications.<sup>75</sup> Bev Mahon commented in 1993, “I do a lot of readings, readings about pictures that I first hear about making a stir somewhere else.”<sup>76</sup> At the same time, Mahon also took account of his knowledge of mid-Iowa audience interest; Denise Mahon said, “he also knew what does well on the coasts doesn’t always go over well here.”<sup>77</sup> As one article about Mahon said, “he occasionally calls other independent theaters such as the Musicbox in Chicago to see what is playing well there.”<sup>78</sup> Sometimes he decided not to order a film due to a negative review from his colleagues.<sup>79</sup> But on other occasions Mahon trusted his own instincts on which films seemed special. For instance, he showed *House of Sand and Fog* in 2003 despite weak reviews from critics, just because he simply found the story creative and original; the conflict over the ownership of a house.<sup>80</sup> He would also look for alternative films, even when some of those films faced difficulties getting into the market.<sup>81</sup> For instance, Mahon sent a letter to Paramount to book *Stepping Out* in 1991 for shows at Christmas time. Paramount had actually withdrawn from showing “Stepping

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<sup>74</sup> Mahon, Bev, interview by Arthur Orduna.

<sup>75</sup> Wilke, “Varsity Theater Breaking Away From the Silver Screen Mainstreams.”

<sup>76</sup> Mahon, Bev, interview by Arthur Orduna.

<sup>77</sup> Kilen, Mike. “Act II for Varsity May Look a Lot Like Act 1.” *Des Moines Register*, April 4, 2009.

<sup>78</sup> Wilke, “Varsity Theater Breaking Away From the Silver Screen Mainstreams.”

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Price, “Varsity Theatre Celebrates 65 Years in Des Moines.”

<sup>81</sup> Mahon, Bev, interview by Arthur Orduna.

Out,” since they believed the movie was not a *good* one and would not be successful. Mahon eventually booked the film and played it for ten weeks.<sup>82</sup>

To order films, Mahon would research bookings several months in advance. On some occasions, he directly wrote to the director and expressed his interest in showing the film in Des Moines.<sup>83</sup> From time to time he would directly contact the production studio to order previews and write letters to distributors to check on films in progress. Eager to show *The Gods Must Be Crazy II*, he waited through a three-year delay due to legal complications;<sup>84</sup> after Mahon at last succeeded in bringing the movie to Des Moines, he kept it on screen for one month straight.<sup>85</sup>

Mahon stubbornly refused to fill his schedule with films he personally considered inferior. One summer in the 1980s, when he was short on options, he continued to play the same film for twenty-three consecutive weeks.<sup>86</sup> He played *The Gods Must be Crazy I* in 1981 for twenty weeks<sup>87</sup> and 1965’s *Doctor Zhivago* for fifty weeks in a row.<sup>88</sup> The Scottish film *Local Hero* ran for twenty-two weeks in 1983 and became the best-drawing film of the 80’s for the Varsity. In some cases, a number of satisfied viewers returned to see the same

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<sup>82</sup> “The “Stepping Out” Story.” *Varsity Des Moines*. March 3, 1991.

<http://www.varsitydesmoines.com/newspapers2.html> (accessed October 15, 2011).

<sup>83</sup> Mahon sometimes negotiated with film companies directly but he also had a booking partner, during 1970s. In more recent years the Varsity worked with another booker, Ron Lewinski, who used to live in New York before he moved to New Jersey. (Mahon, Denise, interview by Author.)

<sup>84</sup> It is worth mentioning that since multiplexes are part of chains, they can show a particular film in many cities in Iowa and across many states and so their buying power is much stronger than a theater that just has a single screen.

<sup>85</sup> Wilke, “Varsity Theater Breaking Away From the Silver Screen Mainstreams.”

<sup>86</sup> Randolph, “Varsity Still Charms After Busy 70 Years.”

<sup>87</sup> Wilke, “Varsity Theater Breaking Away From the Silver Screen Mainstreams.”

<sup>88</sup> Finney and Hottle, “Bev Mahon, 86, longtime Owner of D.M.’s Varsity Theater, Dies.”

movie multiple times. Denise Mahon recalled they had people who would come and watch the movie for four or five times.<sup>89</sup> “One couple saw [*Local Hero*] eighteen times”, Bev Mahon mentioned in 1989.<sup>90</sup> Sometimes NC-17 movies were screened at the Varsity, such as Ang Lee’s *Lust Caution* (2007).<sup>91</sup>

Mahon would often go to film conventions and festivals in the U.S., such as ShoWest. In recent years, however, his interest declined, since he grew frustrated at seeing that those conventions were filled with what he considered “pompous” business men. In 2005, he went to the Show Canada in Nova Scotia instead.<sup>92</sup> When Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) had not been released yet, he went to Kansas City to attend a special screening. He enjoyed the movie and later screened it at the Varsity.<sup>93</sup>

The homogeneity of the film industry often limited Mahon’s booking choices. “I would say nine out of ten pictures I see, I’m glad I saw them in time because they just aren’t pictures that we want to play here”.<sup>94</sup> Nonetheless, Mahon’s complex film selection process was fruitful most of the time. He reflected in 1993, “I don’t always make a great choice. But I think we usually pick something that satisfies.”<sup>95</sup>

Mahon advertised in Iowa newspapers such as the *Des Moines Register* to draw people from other neighboring cities to the Varsity. Mahon often prepared the advertising posters and newspapers ads himself, although other theater owners usually left that process to film

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<sup>89</sup> Mahon, Denise, interview by Author.

<sup>90</sup> Wilke, “Varsity Theater Breaking Away From the Silver Screen Mainstreams.”

<sup>91</sup> Sesterhenn, Kit, “The Varsity Theater: A Campus Staple since 1938.”

<sup>92</sup> *Cityview*, “Declaration of Independents.

<sup>93</sup> Borsellino, “A Sneak Peek at Gibson’s Film.” *Des Moines Register*, January 26, 2004, 2A.

<sup>94</sup> Price, “Varsity Theatre Celebrates 65 Years in Des Moines.”

<sup>95</sup> Mahon, Bev, interview by Arthur Orduna.



distributors and advertising agencies. In recent years, Mahon would also inform a list of 5,000 customers through email about the Varsity's upcoming screening.<sup>96</sup> As an independent theater, the Varsity relied on newspaper advertisements, but even more than that, on word of mouth. Bev Mahon said in 1989, "We depend of word of mouth which makes the repeat customers even more important."<sup>97</sup> Customers at a multiplex might blame the director, actors or screenwriter if they are not content with the film, but would rarely hold the theater itself responsible for choosing a disappointing film. However, customers developed a different, far more personal relationship with the Varsity, knowing that theater had the liberty to select its movie and often trusting its reputation for showing *good* movies.

As a small independent theater, the Varsity had to compete against larger operations. In recent years, the Mahons presented the Varsity under the slogan "the affordable", emphasizing that their admission prices were lower than those of other theaters in town, especially multiplexes. The Varsity also emphasized the economic value of its concessions, having deliberately kept prices of popcorn, candy, and drinks, "the lowest in town," according to Denise Mahon.<sup>98</sup> That strategy ran counter to the general trend in the movie business; with the rising price of film rentals for exhibitors in recent years, concessions came to supersede box office income as a sustaining revenue for movie theaters.<sup>99</sup> At a corporate

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<sup>96</sup> Sesterhenn, "The Varsity Theater: A Campus Staple since 1938."

<sup>97</sup> Wilke, "Varsity Theater Breaking Away From the Silver Screen Mainstreams."

<sup>98</sup> Mahon, Denise, interview by Author.

<sup>99</sup> "Citizen Fridley." *Small Business Buzz*, Vol. 1, Issue 4, 2005.

chain theater in the early twenty-first century, usually the profit margin for a theater-size tub of popcorn ran over 90 percent.<sup>100</sup>

More than that, by the end of the twentieth century, most chain theaters had begun showing advertisements and trailers before the show, a trend supplying a major source of revenue. According to Patrick Corcoran, the Spokesperson for the National Association of Theater Owners, advertisement showing has brought in revenue increasing “by roughly ten to fifteen percent a year for the past several years.”<sup>101</sup> To differentiate their venue, the Varsity’s owners intentionally avoided running such commercials. Denise Mahon said, “We have no advertising. All the other movie theaters you go, they show all that advertising before the shows. And they get paid for it. Dad never did any advertising. He hated that. He tried treating people like he liked to be treated. So he would never show advertising because he didn’t like it. And previews, we just do one or two at the most.”<sup>102</sup> By the twenty-first century, the Mahons took distinct pride in separating their business practices from those of competing multiplex theaters, believing that audiences would notice and appreciate the differences.

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<sup>100</sup> Mackenzie, Richard B. *Why Popcorn Costs So Much at the Movies: and Other Pricing Puzzles*. New York: Springer, 2008, 79.

<sup>101</sup> Morgan, Sarah. “10 Things Movie Theaters Won’t Tell You.” *SmartMoney*, January 2010.

<sup>102</sup> Mahon, Denise, interview by Author.

## Chapter Four: Des Moines's Film Culture and Theater Business<sup>103</sup>

### 1.1. 1930s-1960s

In order to understand more fully the place and evolution of the Varsity Theater in central Iowa, it is important to get a broader sense of the history of the region's movie theater business. During the inter-war period in 1935, the Des Moines area had sixteen one-screen indoor theaters<sup>104</sup>, the Avalon, Beaver, Casino, Des Moines, Family, Garden, Grand, Hiland, Iowa, Lyric, Orpheum, Paramount, Roosevelt, Strand, Uptown and Varsity.

The Varsity Theater was (and remains) located on the east side of town, which has a distinctive history from its westside counterpart. Since the early twentieth century, Des Moines has been recognized by these two distinct areas, divided by the Des Moines River; East Village and West Des Moines. The East side enjoyed a relative growth early on, as the home for Iowa's State Capitol building (completed in 1886). The East side of the city also boasted easy access to the railroad network, as well as strength from industrial development that attracted a diverse immigrant population of Scandinavians, Jews and Africans. On the other hand, the west side benefited by having more suitable lands for the construction of skyscrapers, which promoted a westward inclination of financial and insurance companies. By the mid-1930s, the East Village was in the last stages of the "City Beautiful Movement"; a series of outdoor improvements and aesthetic enhancements which had been undertaken on

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<sup>103</sup> I compiled a database on the lost history of Des Moines movie theaters by going over the back issues of the *Des Moines Register* available at the Iowa State University's Parks Library in microfilm from 1935 to 2005, looking at ten-year intervals.

<sup>104</sup> Vaudeville theaters and auditoriums that would offer only live entertainment, such as stage plays, live shows and musical performances were excluded in this study. Throughout this paper, the use of the term "theaters" only refers to motion picture, unless otherwise stated.

the east side of Des Moines since the turn of the century. The movement brought about the construction of new public buildings and civic centers, such as the Des Moines Public Library (1900-1903), a center for the US Postal Service (1909-1910), and the World War Memorial building (1934-1935) as vital components of the East village. The city improvements also included the cleaning up the Des Moines River's neighborhood, along with the establishment of "parks and a citywide boulevard system."<sup>105</sup>

In the movie theater advertisement section of the *Des Moines Register's* issue of 3 November 1935, out of the sixteen movie houses, eleven theaters, including the Varsity, were listed under a column titled, *progressive-independent theaters*. Uptown was the newest theater in the city, just celebrating the first Sunday of its existence. Except for the Lyric Theater, which was located on the west side, all the other theaters were more or less located on the east side (though not necessarily on the east side of the river). Nine theaters were located in downtown Des Moines, including the Paramount, Orpheum and Des Moines Theater. Six theaters, including the Varsity, were located in different areas across the city. The nearest theaters to the Varsity were Roosevelt Theater (42th Street and Rollins Avenue) and the new Uptown Theater (University Avenue and 42th Street).

In that heyday of Depression-era Hollywood, during the first week of November 1935, those theaters all together showed thirty-nine movies. A majority of these films were produced by a single company, rather than by multiple production companies. Most films were produced and distributed by a Hollywood studio. Twenty-seven films were produced and distributed by the *Big Five*, and seven were distributed by the *Little Three* (Table 1).

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<sup>105</sup> Oltrogge, Sarah C. *Images of America: East Village*. Charleston: Arcadia, 2009, 7, 9, 21.

United Artists, unlike Paramount and Columbia, was involved in the distribution of other independent companies' productions, such as Twentieth Century Picture's *The Call of the Wind*.<sup>106</sup>

**Table 1:** Films shown in the Des Moines area  
*Des Moines Register*, November 1-7, 1935

Major U.S. Theatrical Distributor		Number of movies
Big Five	MGM	9
	Paramount	7
	RKO	5
	Warner Bros.	4
	Fox Film Corporation	2
Little Three	Universal	3
	United Artists	3
	Columbia	1
Other American Companies		4
British		1

There were four independent productions appearing in Des Moines that week, four American films from the small Poverty Row firms, such as Mascot and Monogram. Unsurprisingly and paralleling the national trend of the day, foreign productions did not have a major place in the American film market. Yet significantly, there was still one foreign film screened in mid-Iowa during this time; *Transatlantic Tunnel*, a British drama/science-fiction picture about the construction of a tunnel from New York to London, starring the American actor Richard Dix. That British movie was screened at the Des Moines Orpheum Theater, as

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<sup>106</sup> 20th Century Pictures- an Independent studio- and Fox Film Incorporation merged together in 1935 and formed 20th Century Fox Film Corporation. The contract for *The Call of the Wind* was made before the merger. (Slide, Anthony. *The New Historical Dictionary of the American Film Industry*, 211.)

the companion picture for RKO's *The Rainmakers*, under the principle of double-feature programing which was popular at many theaters at the time.

Despite the dominant presence of Hollywood productions and the existing qualitative homogeneity in the type of films shown, the city during this sample period in 1935 was enjoying a quantitative diversity of specific productions. Audiences had the opportunity to choose between thirty-four different films; out of the thirty-nine movies on screen that week, only five were duplicated by other theaters. The Des Moines and Roosevelt theaters, which were located about four miles away from each other, had simultaneous showings for all their pictures and even shared one ad together. The only screening of the week at both the Grand and the Varsity was Warner Bros.'s *Broadway Gondolier*. During the same week, the Iowa Theater's only picture, Paramount's *The Man on the Flying Trapeze*, and Lyric's only show, RKO's *Top Hat*, were duplicated by the Uptown and Hiland theaters, respectively. According to an editorial piece in the *Register*'s issue of November 3, 1935, Avalon Theater was bringing back RKO's *Roberta* to screen for the second time due to patron demand.<sup>107</sup>

The *Des Moines Register* of the 1930s apparently did not run a separate exclusive section for film; sometimes theater advertisements were surrounded by other ads, as non-related as Kleenex. But the newspaper more or less had a space for movie theaters' advertisements, which were sometimes accompanied by editorial staffs' movie reviews and/or short news from film the industry, ranging from Norman Taurog's favorite list of classic films to the improvement in the health condition of the film star Mae March. The

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<sup>107</sup> *Des Moines Register*, November 3, 1935.

Sunday issue had a review of all the upcoming week's shows, sorted by the exhibiting theater, and also ads from existing theaters in town. The Varsity, like many other theaters, ran only one ad that entire week and that was in the Sunday issue. However, the Paramount, Orpheum, Roosevelt and Des Moines theaters had daily ads on a regular basis. Some movie theaters such as Paramount ran a considerably more spacious ad, which could be an indicator of the financial viability of the theater. Depending on size of the advertisement, that publicity contained different features. While ads would normally include showtimes, movie title, and the theater's address and telephone number, the larger ones most often would additionally contain a brief plot summary, a reproduction of the film poster, and most notably, the names of actors/actresses printed in bold and in larger font size, and sometime their photos. Even smaller ads generally contained a textual reference to the stars of the movie. One observation is evident; directors were often neglected, and the cast was the center of advertisement and of editorial movie reviews. In the editorial movie review of the Paramount Theater's double feature program- MGM's *It's in the Air* and Paramount's *Without Regret*- there was no reference to the directors, Charles Reisner and Harold Young. Instead, the editorial review focused readers' attention on the starring performers, Jack Benny, Una Merkel, Ted Healy, Nat Pendleton, Mary Carlisle, Grant Mitchell and Harvey Stephens of "*It's in the Air*," and Elissa Landi, Paul Cavanagh, Kent Taylor, Frances Drake and David Niven of "*Without Regret*." Indeed, in the *Des Moines Register*'s Sunday review of all sixteen theaters' film programs for the following week, and in the theaters' ads through the entire week, there was no reference to directors, except in the special case of *The Crusades*. In an epic-scale production, the *Crusades*' director had gathered ten thousand extras for two major battle scenes; making the movie "was one of the most gigantic tasks ever attempted in

Hollywood.”<sup>108</sup> The *Register* review acclaimed the director, Cecil B. DeMille, as the “acknowledged master of film spectacle,” and DeMille’s role was mentioned in the ad of the exhibiting theater as well.<sup>109</sup> Nonetheless it seems in general that what could sell a movie to audiences back then was chiefly the well-known stars. This goes with the fact that studios had indeed made actors and actresses into public personalities back then. In Classical Hollywood, a movie’s popularity was seemingly determined most directly by the movie’s stars; that condition would become more complicated later, when movies (especially art films) would frequently be identified and promoted by the director’s credentials.

Newspaper advertisements give a rough estimate of admission fees for Des Moines movies in the mid-Depression era, since some theaters included their general and/or special ticket prices in their ads. Depending on seat type, day and time of the show, and of course the theater, admission would range from as low as ten cents for kids at the Uptown Theater to as high as forty-one cents for adults at the Roosevelt Theater’s evening showtimes in 1935. That figure was almost equal to the minimum hourly wage of forty cents which was soon to be established by the Fair Labor Standards Act by towards the end of 1930s.<sup>110</sup> The Varsity Theater during this time did not include the admission charge in its ad.

Des Moines was a thriving city through the first eight decades of the twentieth century, displaying a strong upward trend in size, in the growth of a modern media market, and in urban development. Six years after WHO radio went on the air in Des Moines in 1924, the

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<sup>108</sup> *Des Moines Register*, November 3, 1935.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Dahl, Orin L. *Des Moines: Capital City*. Oklahoma: Continental Heritage, Inc., 1978, 179.



population of Des Moines was 142,550. In 1940 and eight years before the opening of the Des Moines Art Center in 1948, the population of Des Moines was slightly below 160,000. When WOI-TV came to the Des Moines area as the area's first station in 1950, the size of Des Moines totaled 177,965. With the rising popularity of television, WHO-TV went on the air in 1954, followed by KRNT-TV's first broadcasting in the following year. Paralleling the nationwide emergence of enclosed shopping malls in the late-1950s and early 1960s, Merle Hay Mall opened in northwest Des Moines in 1959. That mall later became the host of Merle Hay Mall Cinema; today's largest single-screen theater in Iowa with the capacity of 800 seats. In 1960, the population of Des Moines doubled to about 200,000, in comparison to its 1920's population of 100,000.<sup>111</sup> The construction of shopping malls accelerated in the 1970s. The first phase of Valley West Mall opened in West Des Moines in August of 1975, and Southridge Mall opened in the October of the same year.

## **1.2. 1960s-1990s**

In the 1960s, the Varsity Theater was under the co-ownership of Mahon and Fridley during this period and was of course, located in its original location across the street from the Drake University in the East Village neighborhood. The Post-World War II period in Des Moines witnessed population growth and suburbanization, and enjoyed economic prosperity paralleling that of the nation. In the short term, the suburban development and population growth resulted in business growth and industrial operation on the east side, however, in the long-term it translated into the westward emergence of chain malls and indoor shopping

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 178-181, 184.

centers. The suburbanization too gradually became a westward phenomenon in Des Moines. The “downtown living” and even patterns of “conducting business” gradually shifted away from the East Village. Soon the “East side turned its back on its history and began to actively demolish buildings, neglect them until they fell under their own weight, or refaced them with new exteriors.” Between 1980 and 1989 alone, the east side witnessed the abolition of forty-one buildings. The quality of life in the neighborhood suffered accordingly; in the 1970s and 1980s the East Village was reportedly responsible for most crimes in the city.<sup>112</sup>

The Des Moines movie business of that era was undergoing substantial change as well. In the 1960s, the *Des Moines Register* then ran a full movie section, called “Theater Clock,” on the movie advertisement page(s), in which the newspaper listed movies and their corresponding showtimes of the same day, alphabetically-sorted by the name of theaters. Most movie theaters were open throughout the week, but a few would only run features on Fridays and weekends. For a sampled section in 1965, the Theater Clock listed fourteen theaters running movies on Sunday Nov. 6; Capri, Ingersoll, Paramount, Des Moines, Varsity, Plantation Drive-In, Pioneer Drive-In, Holiday, South East 14<sup>th</sup> Street Drive-In, Galaxy, Eastown, Hiland and West-Vue Drive-In. Galaxy was originally a vaudeville house under the name of Empress Theater that had converted to motion pictures after renaming to Galaxy.<sup>113</sup>

A theater’s showtimes could change throughout the week. While the Varsity’s earliest showtime was at 6 in the evening, it also ran a matinee (following the once-popular practice

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<sup>112</sup> Oltrogge, *Images of America: East Village*, 7-8, 55.

<sup>113</sup> McCue, Craig S., and Ron Playle. *Postcard History Series: Des Moines*. Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2007, 84.

of showing movies in the daytime, particularly in the afternoon) at 2 p.m. on Tuesday afternoon. Out of fourteen theaters in the Des Moines area, five theaters were drive-in theaters, reflecting the broader trend of the emergence of drive-ins in the 1950s across the country. Unlike the films exhibited in the sample week discussed above for 1935, a great portion of films shown in Des Moines in this week for 1965 were not new releases. Out of forty-two movies, nineteen films were pre-1965 Hollywood releases. Some theaters, most often drive-ins, did better business by showing big hits or old double-feature *B-movies* (such as sex farces or typical westerns), rather than new foreign releases. That pattern suggests that theaters perceived customers as displaying a continuing interest in mainstream movies. The Capitol Drive-in screened six movies in the week, and its only 1965 release was the comedy, *The Girls on the Beach*. Nonetheless, drive-ins would occasionally screen new releases. The Plantation drive-in, for instance, screened 1965's *The Beach Girls and the Monster* for the first time in the city, and *Kwaheri* (1965) was first screened in Des Moines by the Pioneer drive-in. Indoor theaters, however, often screened new releases. For instance, the Paramount Theater screened MGM's *Harum Scarum*, the Capri Theater screened Fox's *The Sound of Music*, the Ingersoll's only picture of the week was Warner Bros.'s *The Great Race*, and the Hiland featured Columbia's *Major Dundee*. The exceptions seen in this sample were the Eastown Theater, which screened *Cleopatra*, the \$44 million budget movie of 1963, starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, and the Varsity. That theater offered a one-day screening for MGM's 1938 black-and-white, *The Great Waltz* and also showed Columbia's comedy, *Under the Yum Yum Tree* (1963).

During the first week of November 1965, from the total of forty-two films screened in the Des Moines area, six films were foreign; four British, one German, and one Italian (a

total of fourteen percent non-American-made movies in the total mix, compared with just two percent in 1935). Both the Italian and German films had been dubbed into English by the distributing company and hence did not confront viewers with a foreign language.

Interestingly, during the golden days of the foreign film market in the United States, in the first week of November 1965, the *only* foreign language art film was not screened in a commercial theatre in Des Moines, but rather in a local church. According to a short news item published in the *Des Moines Register* issue of Nov 7, 1965, Ingmar Bergman's 1955 work, *Smiles of a Summer Night*, was screened on a Friday and Saturday in the First Unitarian Church in Des Moines. The admission was \$1.25 and \$1 for adults and students respectively. In the news piece, the approval of the Cannes Film Festival was mentioned as a promotion for the film. "[*Smile of a Summer Night*] was the grand prize for comedy at the Cannes Film Festival."<sup>114</sup>

Of the forty-two movies shown in Des Moines that week of 1965, twenty seven films were distributed by a major Hollywood studio. However, one quarter of all American pictures at that week were neither produced nor distributed by Hollywood studios. Instead, those films were made and released by other smaller independent companies (twenty-five percent of all movies in 1965, in comparison to ten percent in 1935). Indeed, unlike the business in the 1930s and 1940, when one single major Hollywood studio was involved in both the production and distribution stages of most domestic releases, what became noticeable by the 1960s was the gradual transition from the marginal Poverty Row-type independent

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<sup>114</sup> *Des Moines Register*, November 7, 1965.

companies to a fairly more original culture, in terms of production independence from Hollywood. Also evident is the collaboration in the production process between major Hollywood studios and other smaller companies, and also cooperation between small-scale companies. About half of the movies, however, were still produced by a single independent or major Hollywood company. Also notable is the involvement of Hollywood majors in the distribution of films that were not their own products, which were produced by other independent/foreign companies. All British pictures of that week, for instance, were distributed by Fox, Paramount, Universal and Columbia.<sup>115</sup>

With regard to production and distribution, it seems Des Moines was not left out of the national trends of the time.

During the first week of November 1965, the Varsity screened six movies; two from Universal Pictures, three from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and one dubbed German film. Significantly, three other theaters in the city showed that same German movie (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Films shown at the Varsity during the first week of 1965  
*Des Moines Register*, November 1-7, 1965

Title	Movie Type	Major U.S. Theatrical Distributor
<i>Under the Yum Yum Tree</i>	Hollywood	Universal Pictures
<i>Ship of Fools</i>	Hollywood	Universal Pictures
<i>The Great Waltz (1938)</i>	Hollywood	MGM
<i>Joy in the Morning</i>	Hollywood	MGM
<i>Yellow Rolls Royce</i>	Hollywood	MGM
<i>The Golden Goose (1964)</i>	German	K. Gordon Murra Production

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<sup>115</sup> *Internet Movie Database (IMDB)*. [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com).

In the first glance, it seems that the Varsity's film selection was not different from that of other theaters at the time, postulating that the Varsity mainly screened American-made films, rather than the more unusual foreign fare with which it became associated among later audiences. By expanding the time period under study from one week to one month, however, further investigation undermines this conjecture.

During the entire month of January 1965, the Varsity screened seventeen movies; surprisingly there were five subtitled foreign-language pictures (two Italian and three French), five British films (ranging from *Only Two Can Play* starring Peter Sellers to less significant films such as *Double Bunk*), and seven features from major Hollywood studios such as Paramount's *The Disorderly Orderly* starring Jerry Lewis.

Overall, evidence suggests that the Varsity's film program did *differ* from that of other theaters in 1965. In the Des Moines area, however, Hollywood productions still fairly dominated during the golden days of foreign movies in the United States.

While other theaters screened dubbed foreign films, the Varsity did not fear to screen subtitled foreign movies, paralleling the art house of 1960s in art-harbor cities across the nation.

With regard to the content, advertisements still dominated the stars in visual or textual promotion. Advertisements boasted that their features included "7 big stars," "academy-award winner Julie Andrews" and "loaded with stars." However, there were occasional references to producers (e.g., James B. Harris and Richard Widemark of *The Bedford Incident*), directors (e.g., Otto Preminger of *Bunny Lake is Missing* and Seth Holt of *The Nanny*), music composer (e.g., Frank Sinatra, Jr. for *The Beach Girl and the Monster*) and sometimes to the name of production studios (e.g., Seven Arts-Hammer Film Production).

Since the Des Moines area had five drive-ins in 1965, those theaters promoted special assets, running ads boasting that they had “hot in-car electric heaters delivered to your car.” With Hollywood’s pursuit of new improvements in sound and color technology, many Des Moines theaters ads included features such as “Technicolor,” “Panavision,” “in Todd-AO,” “color co-hit,” “all in color,” “metrocolor,” “techniscope” and “6 channel sound.” Theaters such as the Paramount that were located in crowded urban areas promoted incentives such as “free parking from 6 to midnight.” Theaters would also appeal to audiences with lines such as, “bring the entire family,” “no seats reserved,” or “good seats available at showtime,” “Harum Scarum” starring Elvis Presley [with] 9 new song hits,” “funny cut-ups,” “we recommend you see this picture from the beginning,” “plus late world news” and “added selected short subjects.” The Holiday’s ad for “*Pawnbroker*” seems interesting; “The answer to recent complaints about the dearth of movies of values...no serious moviegoer should miss it”.<sup>116</sup> *Pawnbroker* was a story of a New Yorker Jewish man who had suffered in Hitler’s concentration camps for years. It was one of the first films to portray the post-war life of a concentration camp survivor.<sup>117</sup>

As almost every household had a TV set in 1965, the *Des Moines Register* had begun running a section listing television programs. “WHO-TV channel 13” published a fairly spacious advertisement for its film program throughout the week. A quick look shows that most TV films shown on television channels at that time were past Hollywood hits of the

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<sup>116</sup> *Des Moines Register*, November 1-7, 1965.

<sup>117</sup> Internet Movie Database (IMDB). Accessed November 26, 2011.

late-1940s and 1950s, such as Columbia's *Johnny Allegro*, from 1949 and Fox's *Belles on Their Toes*, from 1952.

During this time, the admission charge ranged from as low as thirty-five cents for children at the Hiland, to as high as \$2.50 for adults for good seats at the Capri Theater.

Interestingly, the German film was screened for only fifty cents in all four exhibiting theaters, including the Varsity. Normally, the Varsity charged one dollar for adults and fifty cents for children. Those admission prices at the Varsity were not the lowest in town, a distinct contrast to its modern self-presentation under its current motto, "Varsity, the affordable." The national average movie-ticket price was eighty-six cents in 1963 and \$1.22 in 1967.<sup>118</sup>

Like many other American cities, the immediate Post-World War II population growth in Des Moines stopped after the 1960s. The population of Des Moines in 1990 was 193,187, even slightly less than its 1960's population that had passed 200,000.<sup>119</sup>

### **1.3. 1990s-present**

Meanwhile, the city's movie business continued to evolve. In the 1990s, the Des Moines area had thirteen theaters that overall contained forty-one screens. The area still had five single-screen theaters; Billy Joe's Pitcher Show, the Merle Hay Mall Cinema, River Hills, the Riviera and the Varsity. The Carmike Cobblestone 9 was the largest multiplex with nine screens, while there were three triplexes in town; the Valley 3, the SouthRidge 3 and the

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<sup>118</sup> National Association of Theatre Owners. "Movie Theater Statistics."

<sup>119</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. Accessed on November 20, 2011.  
<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/19/1921000lk.html>



Sierra 3. Other multiplexes were the Fleur 4, the Forum 4, the Value Cinema 7 and the Westwood 6 theaters. There were also adult theaters such as the Eastgate Cinema III. The Easttown, a once-regular theater in the mid-1970s, had renamed itself Theater 1536 and mainly turned to the screening of adult movies by the mid-1990s.<sup>120</sup>

The city's major newspaper still served as the major vehicle for letting residents evaluate local offerings. The *Des Moines Register* of November 2, 1995 had a comprehensive movie review section produced under the name of the Register's movie critic, Joan Bunke. That sample featured the "movie ratings, capsule summaries of the movies and show times [from] Thursday through Sunday."<sup>121</sup> The rating system was meant to give readers a quick, easy sense of a movie's quality; ratings were based on a rising scale from no stars (hopeless) to five stars (excellent).

Most theaters- except the Sierra and the Value Cinema- still ran newspaper advertisements in 1995, as a way to appeal directly to potential audience members and draw them out of their homes, away from the television set and movies on tape. Those 1990s theater ads were more or less similar to their 1960s counterparts, featuring promotional quotes praising movies, highlights of top stars, etc. However, theater advertisements as well as movie reviews contained a new feature; a movie rating system (G, PG, PG-13, R, NC-17), designed to alert audiences to whether or not a film's content was suitable for younger viewers. During the first week of November 1995, more than half of the movies (all non-adults) that were screened in the Des Moines area were R-rated (twenty three out of forty-

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<sup>120</sup> This study does not include adult theaters.

<sup>121</sup> *Des Moines Register*, November 2, 1995.

one). Seven, nine, and two movies were rated PG-13, PG, and G, respectively. The R-rated films were rated R for “language”, “F-speak to the max”, “gross humor”, “gross behavior”, “racial slurs”, “nudity/brief nudity”, “adult sexuality”, “sex as combat depictions”, “graphic sexual depictions”, “violence/extreme violence”, “gore” and/or “menace”.<sup>122</sup>

The *Des Moines Register* still ran the “Theater Clock.” However, the movie showtimes list was not sorted by the name of exhibiting movie theaters, but by the name of movies, lining up the name of exhibiting theater(s) in front of each movie title. That made it easier for viewers to select a film based on a convenient time and de-emphasized the exhibiting theater as a determining factor. Since almost half of the forty-one movies that were screened during the first week of November 1995 were duplicated by at least one other theater, perhaps it was more practical to sort the exhibiting venues based on the movies. David Fincher’s *Se7en* starring Brad Pitt and Morgan Freeman, and Paramount’s *Vampire in Brooklyn* starring Eddie Murphy and Angela Basset were shown in three multiplexes simultaneously. Even one-screen theaters’ programs were duplicated by competition from multiplexes. River Hill’s both pictures, *Copycat* (Warner Bros.) and *Fair Game* (Warner Bros.), two pictures of Billy Joe’s Pitcher Show, *Pocahontas* (Buena Vista) and *A Walk in the Clouds* (Fox), Riviera’s only feature of the week, *The Scarlet Letter* (Buena Vista), and Merle Hay Mall Cinema’s only picture of the week, *Get Shorty* (MGM), were all duplicated by at least another multiplex. Interestingly, the Varsity’s film program of that sample week was not duplicated by any other theater in town. Indeed, except for the Varsity, the four other one-screen locally-owned

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

theaters all screened mainstream hits that also often ran simultaneously in other chain theaters in town (Table 3). The only mainstream movie that was exclusively shown by a locally-owned one-screen theater was *Clueless*, shown at Billy Joe's Pitcher Show.

**Table 3:** Locally-owned theaters' film programs during the first week of November 1995  
Source: The *Des Moines Register*, November 1-7, 1995, *IMDB* and *Box Office Mojo*

Theater	Movie	Distributing Company	Budget	Domestic Gross	Widest Nationwide Theatrical Release
Billy Joe's Pitcher Show	Clueless	Paramount	12,000,000	\$56,631,572	1,922
	Pocahontas	Buena Vista	55,000,000	\$141,579,773	2,757
River Hills	Copycat	Warner Bros.	20,000,000	\$32,051,917	1,661
	Fair Game	Warner Bros.	50,000,000	\$11,534,477	1,949
Merle Hay Mall Cinema	Get Shorty	MGM	30,250,000	\$72,101,622	2,103
Riviera	The Scarlet Letter	Buena Vista	50,000,000	\$10,382,407	1,518
Varsity	A Month by the Lake	Sony Picture Classics	N/A	\$2,101,087	10
	Persuasion	Miramax Films	N/A	\$5,269,757	1

While other independently-owned theaters did not screen independent or art pictures, as the above table shows, the Varsity was the only one-screen locally-owned theater that screened non-mainstream films. Varsity's two exclusive pictures during the first week of November of 1995 were two British, English-language independent films; *Persuasion*,

distributed by Sony Picture Classics, a division of Sony Pictures Entertainment, and *A Month by the Lake*, coproduced and distributed by Miramax, a subsidiary of Walt Disney at the time.

Of those five one-screen locally-owned theaters that existed in 1995, only the Merle Hay Mall Cinema, which still has the largest auditorium in Des Moines, and the Varsity are still around today.

In the absence of foreign-language films, English-language independent films such as the Varsity's program complemented the Hollywood mainstream. In fact, Hollywood doubtlessly dominated the market but in a less direct way, as Hollywood's studios now owned multiple subsidiaries, such as Miramax and Sony Picture Classics, which had enabled studios to get involved in the distribution of foreign films and production of independent movies. Moreover, the 1986 antitrust legislation had allowed studios to own theaters only through separate subsidiaries.

Either independent or Hollywood, most movies of the mid-1990s were produced by multiple companies. Out of the forty-one productions shown in Des Moines during this sample week of 1995, only five films were produced by a single company. Some studios had joint-subdivisions. For instance, the thirty million budget Australian picture, *Babe*, which was screened at the Valley 3, was coproduced and distributed by United International Pictures (UIP), a joint-subsubsidiary of Paramount Pictures and Universal Studios.

The Varsity now presented itself as "the affordable" theater in its newspaper ads, as its admission charge was \$5 for adults; one dollar lower than the average admission price for a first-run multiplex in Des Moines during 1995. However, the Varsity's admission price was one dollar above the Paramount Theater's admission in Ankeny and Indianola, and also

above the average U.S. ticket price in 1995 which was \$4.35.<sup>123</sup> By comparison, Billy Joe's Pitcher Show's regular admission was three dollars, though it had daily matinees (before 6) for just two dollars admission and offered Monday Madness specials for just one dollar.

In practice, however, the Varsity by the 1990s was moving to distinguish itself from competitors by more than just price; the theater was boasting of the unique character of its programming. That trend was reflected in its changing advertisement patterns in the *Des Moines Register* throughout the years. Between 1954, when Mahon and Fridley took over the ownership of the Varsity, up until the early 1970s, feature advertisements for the Varsity generally followed the same trends in appearance and content as the ads for other Des Moines theaters. But by 1975, Varsity's ads had become fairly small and plain in appearance and also notably simpler than most other theater ads. By the 1980s, Varsity ads featured a new promotional motto, "Movies to Talk About", and by the 1990s, added the motto, "The Affordable." During the 1990s, the Varsity ads employed a variety of other mottos such as the "Home of The Good Stuff" and "Movies to Talk About" Such slogans sought to highlight the increasingly distinctive nature of the Varsity's film program.<sup>124</sup>

Meanwhile, another reality had hit the entertainment business, the need to compete against the spread of video-rental stores. With the rising popularity of home video in the 1990s, the *Des Moines Register* began devoting a separate section to new video releases, including a review of new video releases, similar to the theatrical movie review. In the November 2, 1995 issue, Columbia's *Little Women* (1994), the low-budget American

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<sup>123</sup> National Association of Theatre Owners. "Movie Theater Statistics."

<sup>124</sup> *Des Moines Register*, November 1-7, 1985 & 1995.

Independent, *Bar Girls* (1994) and \$100 million budget *Batman Forever* of Warner Bros. (1995) were reviewed by the Register movie critic, Joan Bunke. Other features of the home video section were suggested video rentals suitable for kids, plus a coming-soon column. In a “Sleeper of the Week” feature, a local movie expert gave personalized video recommendations; for example, the manager of a Des Moines-based video shop suggested *Singin’ in the Rain*, a 1952 musical Technicolor film. The home video section also listed the top ten rental films of the previous week in the Des Moines area and also across the country. The source of information on Des Moines’ top rentals was the Five Star Video, a video rental shop located in West Des Moines, and the source of data indicating the nation’s most popular rentals was Billboard publications. (Table 4)

**Table 4:** Top Ten Home Video Rentals  
*Des Moines Register*, November 2, 1995, *Box Office Mojo* and *IMDB*

Rank	Des Moines Area	Genre	Rating	Nationwide	Genre	Rating
1	The Santa Clause	Family Comedy	PG	Pulp Fiction	Crime	R
2	While You Were Sleeping	Romantic Comedy	PG	French Kiss	Romantic Comedy	PG-13
3	Casper	Family Comedy	PG	Don Juan Demarco	Romantic Comedy	PG-13
4	The Cure	Drama	PG-13	Outbreak	Action Drama	R
5	Jury Duty	Comedy	PG-13	Casper	Family Comedy	PG
6	Rob Roy	Period Adventure	R	Kiss Of Death	Crime Thriller	R
7	Pulp Fiction	Crime	R	Rob Roy	Period Adventure	R
8	French Kiss	Romantic Comedy	PG-13	Just Cause	Thriller	R
9	Tommy Boy	Comedy	PG-13	Major Payne	Comedy	PG-13
10	Don Juan Demarco	Romantic Comedy	PG-13	Tommy Boy	Comedy	PG-13

Interestingly, of the top five rental videos in the Des Moines area, only one movie, Universal's \$50 million picture, *Casper* (1995), was among the nation's top ten. The top three rental films across the nation were respectively ranked seventh, eighth, and tenth in Des Moines's top rental list. The two lists, however, duplicated six films but in different orders. All movies in both lists, with no exception, were mainstream Hollywood productions that had enjoyed wide distribution during their theatrical exhibition. In terms of genre, while Des Moines's list had no thriller picture, most movies in both lists had a *comedy* subtlety. The top three films of Des Moines's list were all PG-rated. Des Moines's list of the most popular rentals, also, had fewer R-rated films, unlike the nationwide list, which had five R-rated films, four PG-13 films and only one G-Rated picture. Overall, it seems that Mid-Iowa moviegoers' movie appetite was not simply an imitation of the national one, but had its own characteristics. In particular, they showed less interest in R-rated pictures. This seems interesting, given the previous findings about Des Moines theaters showing so many R-rated movies and so few PG/G-rated ones. Moviegoers in home video shops have the liberty to *choose* what to see, and it seems that they chose a different mix of movies, at least in comparison to the top national rentals in that sample week in 1995. This suggests that what Iowa moviegoers are compelled to choose from on the screens of Des Moines theaters might not necessarily match their Midwestern movie taste.

By the early twenty-first century, the theater business in central Iowa had continued to evolve. Fast-forwarding to 2005, the Varsity screened twenty-one movies throughout the entire year. More than one-third of the Varsity's movies were foreign language pictures; one German, one Italian, two Mandarin, two French and two films with multiple languages. Of those foreign films, two were relatively popular nationwide. The *House of Flying Daggers*,

the \$15.8 million budget Chinese masterpiece of Yimou Zhang appeared on 1189 screens across the U.S. at the widest point of its theatrical release, while the \$18.2 million budget German picture, *Downfall*, had a widest theatrical release of 174 screens.

All of the Varsity's foreign language films were poorly distributed across the country, indicating the Varsity's move toward focusing in an unusual film program. (Table 5) For instance, the Varsity was one of only nine theaters across the U.S. to show the Israeli documentary, *Watermarks* was only nine.

**Table 5:** The Varsity's Film Program in 2005

Movie Title	Widest Nationwide Theatrical Release
Bright Leaves	4
Watermarks	9
Caterina In The Big City	13
Balzac And The Little Chinese Seamstress	22
Nine Lives	33
The Beat That My Heart Skipped	37
Walk On Water	47
My Summer Of Love	63
Look At Me	75
Grizzly Man	105
The Merchant Of Venice	107
Junebugs	143
The Squed And The Whale	151
Enron: The Smartest Guys In The Room	151
Downfall	174
Bride And Prejudice	288
Millions	340
Proof	517
House Of Flying Daggers	1189
Pride And Prejudice	1335

To accompany these foreign language films, the Mahons chose five Hollywood art films; *Proof*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Junebugs* and *Sideways*. These pictures

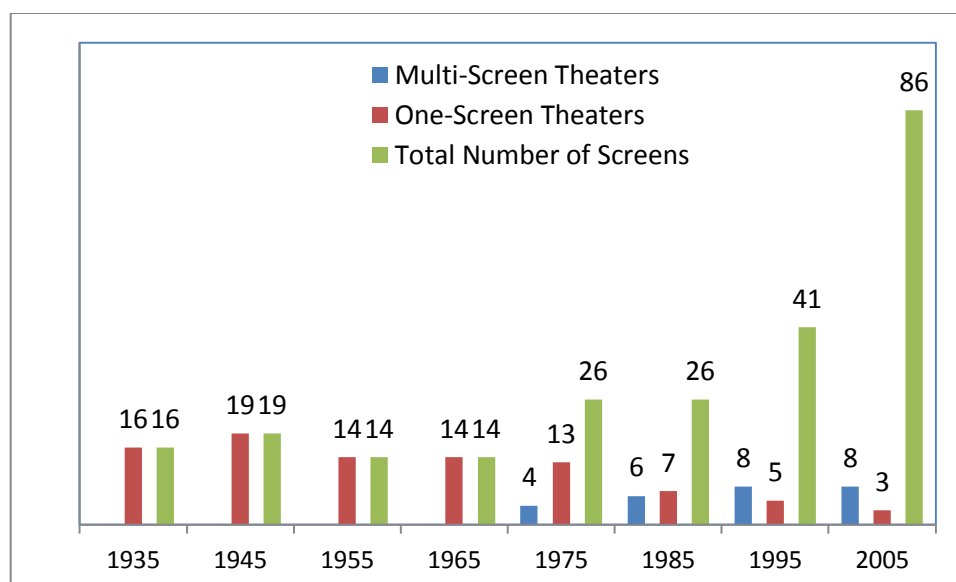


were distributed, and in some cases also produced by the subsidiaries of major Hollywood studios such as Sony Picture Classics, Fox Searchlight Pictures, Universal's Focus Picture and Miramax (owned by Walt Disney at the time). Those subsidiaries specialized in the distribution and/or production of art and foreign film features. There were also five low-budget American independent films such as Magnolia Pictures' *Nine Lives*, and three British movies such as Danny Boyle's *Millions*.

Overall, it is evident that the Varsity's 2005 film screenings emphasized non-mainstream productions, whether English-language independent films, foreign-language films or Hollywood unusual movies. While Hollywood mainstream films often enjoyed wide theatrical distribution in thousands of multiplexes across the nation, the Varsity brought to Des Moines some movies that were often overlooked by major American distributors and so were only selectively screened around the country. And hence, the Varsity's schedule gave central Iowans the opportunity to see pictures that often they could not find duplicated in other theaters in town or, indeed, anywhere else in the state.

#### **1.4. Overall Trends**

Over the years throughout the twentieth century, the total number of theaters in the Des Moines area slightly decreased from nineteen theaters in 1945 to eleven in 2005, while the total number of screens dramatically increased, starting in the mid-1970s, as the result of multiplexing. (Figure 1)



**Figure 1:** *Des Moines Register*, November 1-7, 1935-2005 in Ten-Year Intervals

As fig. 1 shows, the first multi-screen theaters came to Des Moines between 1965 and 1975. By November 1975, Des Moines already had four multi-screen theaters; the Eastgate Cinema 2, the Fleur 4, the Forum 4 and the SouthRidge 3. By 1998, the Carmike corporation had twelve theaters in Des Moines and it was planning to construct a fifteen-screen theater in West Des Moines. Silver Cinemas had opened a ten-screen theater on Merle Hay Road, near the large popular mall, and the AMC chain had planned to open a theater in downtown by late 2000. Over the years, Carmike gained “a near monopoly” on Des Moines’s theater business. Des Moines was indeed following the national trend of rapid multiplexing. In 1998, Mahon’s former partner Bob Fridley bitterly commented on the wide expansion of theaters in the city, saying, “I think Des Moines is going to be badly built.”<sup>125</sup>

<sup>125</sup> Martin, David. “How many is too many?” *Cityview*, November 11, 1998.

Paralleling the emergence of multiplexes, the number of one-screen theaters declined. In 2005, there were only three one-screen theaters left in the city; Billy Joe's Pitcher Show,<sup>126</sup> Merle Hay Mall Cinema and the Varsity Theater, in comparison to nineteen uniplexes that had existed in Des Moines in 1945. Out of eighty-six screens in town in 2005, only three screens belonged to uniplexes, and eighty-three screens were owned by eight multiplexes, ranging from the three-screen Sierra Theater to the giant Century with twenty screens.

While the total number of screens has been growing dramatically, the population of Polk County has been increasing only moderately (Table 6)

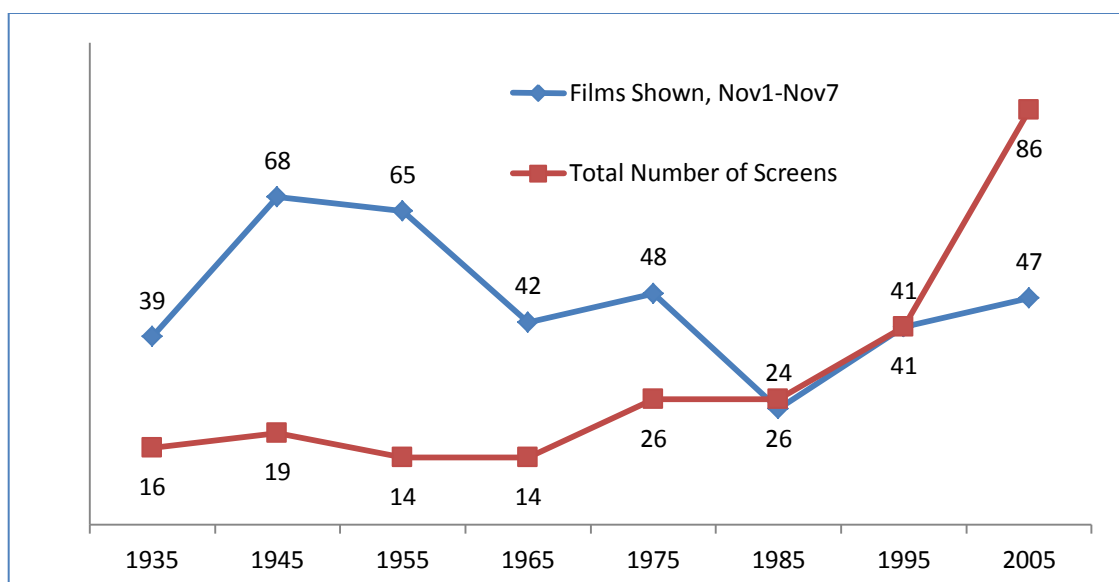
**Table 6:** Polk County Population vs. Number of Screen in the Des Moines.  
*Des Moines Register*, November 1-7, 1935-2005 in Ten-Year Intervals  
 Population data from U.S. Census Bureau website

Year	Number of Screens in the DSM Area	Year	Polk County Population
1935	16	1930	154029
1945	19	1940	172837
1955	14	1950	195835
1965	14	1960	226010
1975	26	1970	266315
1985	26	1980	288610
1995	41	1990	303170
2005	86	2000	327140

Despite the proliferation of screens across the Des Moines area, ironically, the post-multiplex Des Moines witnessed less quantitative diversity in the film market. (Figure 2)

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<sup>126</sup> Billy Joe's Picture Show was opened as a one-screen independent discount theater in a bar area during the midst of multiplexing circa 1983, but closed its theater in 2009 and continued as a bar. (Cinema Treasures. Accessed November 22, 2011. <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/28888>)



**Figure 2:** Saturation; Films vs. Screens, Des Moines Area,  
*Des Moines Register*, November 1-7, 1935-2005 in Ten-Year Intervals

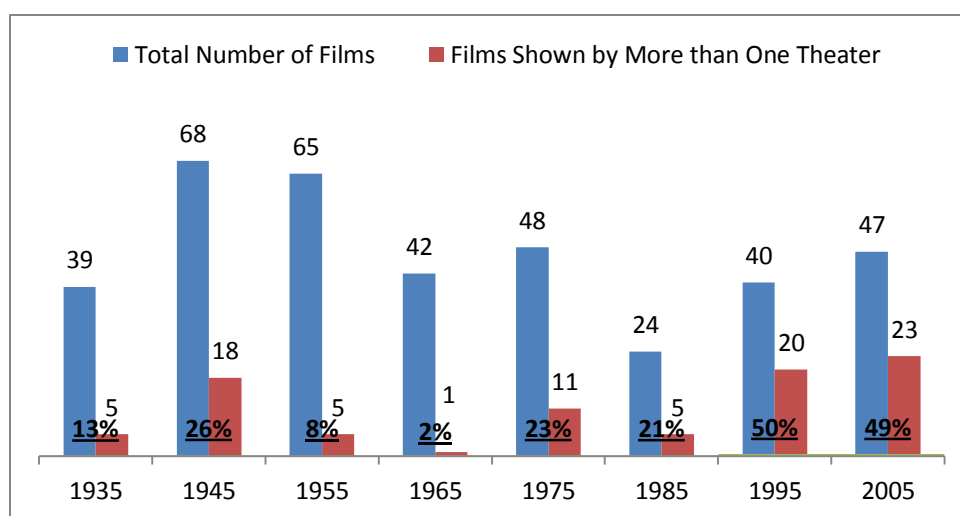
During the first week of November 1995 and 2005, forty-one and forty-seven films were screened on forty-one and eighty-six screens in Des Moines, respectively. Those statistics represented a drastic decline in comparison with 1945, when 68 movies were shown in only nineteen one-screen theaters during the first week of November. Although film screening in Des Moines does not yield a consistent pattern over the years, it is obvious that having more screens did not bring a larger number or a wider variety of films to the city.

The ratio of number of screens per film, however, unlike the total number of films, has a more linear behavior and has been more or less increasing over the years (Table 7). While this factor fluctuates from 0.2 to 0.5 until before 1975, it jumps to slightly over 1 in 1985 and reaches to 1.8 in 2005, indicating that the number of screens outnumbered the number of films as multiplexes came into town.

**Table 7:** The ratio of number of screen to the number of films screened during the first week of November, from 1935-2005 in ten-year intervals

Year	Screen per Film
1935	0.4
1945	0.3
1955	0.2
1965	0.3
1975	0.5
1985	1.1
1995	1.0
2005	1.8

Another important observation is that over the years, more theaters started competing with each other in showing the same films. In 1995, twenty-one movies in Des Moines were shown at more than one theater, accounting for fifty-one percent of the total number of films seen in the city at that time. In 2005, twenty-three films were screened at more than one theater, (accounting for forty-nine percent of films), a considerable percentage increase in comparison with any other earlier period. (Figure 3)



**Figure 3:** Quantitative Diversity; Number of Films Shown by More than One Theater in the Des Moines Area, *Des Moines Register*, November 1-7, From 1935-2005, in Ten-Year Intervals.

While Mahon moved by the 1990s toward featuring unusual films at the Varsity, his former partner took a different path in the movie theater business in the Midwest, which is worth exploring. Bob (Robert) Fridley had a background and early childhood similar to

Mahon's, and likewise became interested in motion pictures at an early age, mostly through an uncle who was in the movie theater business. Fridley graduated from high school during the Depression era, and started to work as what was called a "kerosene" or "Jack Rabbit circuit." His job was to go from town and town and screen films in vacant theaters or opera house with rented equipment. During the heyday of Hollywood, Fridley went broke, moved to Des Moines, and worked for the National Screen Service like Mahon. Fridley spent three and a half years in the army, but stayed connected to the movie business. During that time when movies were "a big part of the war effort," he was a "supervising theater manager at Camp Standish in Massachusetts." With the rising popularity of TV during the postwar years, Fridley went to the University of Southern California to study film production in the hope of getting a job in television business, but like Mahon, he left school after a while. After Fridley returned to Iowa, he together with Mahon took over the ownership of the Varsity. In 1960, Fridley "opened the first 70 mm theater in Iowa in the Capri Theater," located in Des Moines. After ending his partnership with Mahon and his involvement with the Varsity theater, Fridley remained in the movie theater business, but in a different way. While Mahon focused all his attention on one prized theater, Fridley pursued expansion. He formed R. L. Fridley Theaters as an Iowa corporation in 1974. By 2005, he had more than 500 employees and 135 screens in theaters across Nebraska and Iowa. His response to multiplexing was different from many of his colleagues. Fridley focused on building new ventures in outlying areas, rather than major cities. In 2010, his organization owned twenty-one theaters in Iowa

cities such as Sioux City and Jefferson and two in Hastings and McCook, Nebraska, but none in Des Moines and Omaha.<sup>127</sup> Fridley got into the home video business too through ownership of video shops in Des Moines.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> "Fridley Theaters," accessed on November 28, 2011. <http://www.fridleytheatres.com/>

<sup>128</sup> "Citizen Fridley." *Small Business Buzz*.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

Americans have a long history as cinemagoers; even the economic constraints imposed on ordinary families during the Great Depression did not end interest in film. Though geographically distant from Hollywood, Iowa has its own history of movie-going as a perennially popular entertainment form for adults and children alike. Today, the Des Moines area has seven multiplexes; the Carmike Cobblestone 9, the Carmike Southridge 12, the Carmike Wynnsong 16, the Century 20 Jordan Creek and XD, the Copper Creek 9, and the Nova 10 Cinemas and the four-screen Fluor Cinema and Café, an overall total of eighty screens. There is also one IMAX screen, the Blank IMAX Dome Theater, as well as the Merle Hay Mall Cinema, which is the largest non-IMAX theater in Iowa. Meanwhile, the Varsity Theater stands as the only surviving independent theater, open continuously since its early inception in the mid-1930s.

My findings suggest that the Varsity Theater's film program mix has been different from that of other theaters since its acquisition by Mahon (and Fridley) in 1954. Even in the mid-1960s and long before the first multi-screen theaters came into town, the Varsity's film program, unlike that of other theaters, regularly included non-Hollywood films, in particular foreign-language movies. Over the years, the tenor of the Varsity's schedule increasingly became an expression of Mahon's own film preferences and sense of audience interest. It seems that the rapid growth of multiplexes in the Des Moines area did not affect Mahon's film selection. In the face of the changing theater business, Mahon continued to show what he would call *good stuff*. Indeed, by the 1990s, the Varsity's advertisements in the *Des Moines Register* increasingly highlighted its distinctive programming. However, the overwhelming presence of multiplexes and the subsequent saturation in the Des Moines's



film market did not leave the long-standing Varsity totally unaffected. To separate itself from competitors and appeal to potential customers, the Varsity's self-presentation shifted towards emphasizing the *affordable* nature of its entertainment, especially the low concessions prices. The Mahons also rejected business practices of the multiplexes which they found offensive, especially the intrusive pre-feature advertising.

Regarding the overall film market in the Des Moines area, it seems that both before and after the emergence of multiplexes in the Des Moines area, the area's film market mainly revolved around mainstream productions. However, over recent periods, there was considerably less quantitative diversity in the number of movies shown. Despite the presence of an immigrant population and a diverse international community in Des Moines, it is evident that central Iowans have had decreasing access to non-mainstream products, even during the golden days of foreign films in the United States. Without the Varsity's programming over recent decades, Des Moines audiences would have missed most of the internationalization of the film medium. Des Moines's movie houses of the 1960s tended to screen past Hollywood releases, rather than taking the more adventurous option of showing subtitled foreign-language art pictures. That programming conservatism prevailed through more recent times; during the 1990s, even independent theaters continued to screen mainstream productions, and most of them eventually went out of business. Indeed, multiplexes damaged the independent theaters that shared the same kind of film programming, because the latter simply could not compete against the more modern buildings with fancy amenities and more popular locations. It was the Varsity, which insisted on screening unusual films that adopted a counterstrategy that allowed it to survive.

In a broader context, the demise of other independent theaters in Des Moines, along with the survival of the Varsity, underlines the need for the historian to distinguish between the history of exhibiting venues and the history of the types of movies shown. Multiplexes may have proved appealing to many customers because of their popular exhibiting advantages over locally-owned small theaters, rather than for the character of their screen offerings. The success of multiplexes does not automatically prove the commercial *superiority* of their Hollywood-driven pictures over the less mainstream alternatives, independent-of-Hollywood pictures. To put it another way, the popularity of multiplexes should not be confused with the seeming popularity of Hollywood/mainstream movies that have been shown in multiplexes in the Des Moines area and elsewhere around the U.S. over the years.

Multiplexes mainly show Hollywood productions, including 3D movies, IMAX and all the special effects bells and whistles. And hence, the financial success of multiplexes, for many, seemed to imply that American moviegoers are by large interested primarily in Hollywood films only. Indeed, that belief apparently proved popular among many of the independent theaters' owners in Des Moines during the late twentieth century. They tried to copy the multiplex strategy, assuming that the screening of Hollywood films was a must, only to later go out of business. As the demise of foreign films coincided with the emergence of multiplexes, and since the 1986 reforms allowed studios to own chain theaters once again, this study suggests that it is worthwhile to re-examine the relationship between multiplexing and Hollywoodization in the American film business.

Furthermore, the Varsity's survival over the years suggests the continued existence of a (niche) market for the world cinema in Des Moines, even as Des Moines's film business

culture placed increasing emphasis on expensive blockbuster films over recent decades. The case of the Varsity reveals how independent and foreign films retained the power to command sufficient consumer interest, even in a relatively small city like Des Moines. The evolution of the Varsity's film program and moviegoers together represents and reflects the character of Des Moines's (niche) market for unusual films.

Indeed, since part of what has defined the Varsity's recent identity as a smaller locally-owned theater has been its focus on showing foreign and independent films, its long history also serves as the case study of non-Hollywood screening in the Des Moines area that expands on other historians' accounts of foreign film and independent movie viewing in U.S. theaters. For instance, many observers have suggested that American moviegoers often feel reluctant to watch foreign films and especially tend to avoid non-English language films, since they find reading subtitles a daunting task. While the Varsity's owners too acknowledge that challenge, they also have emphasized that their patrons have become more tolerant toward subtitled films over the years. Like the foreign film culture in the American art-harbors of the 1960s, the Varsity's own experience, too, undermines the discouraging assumption that subtitles alone have doomed most foreign-language movies to relative failure in the United States.

While Des Moines's theaters imitated the national shift toward the multiplexing business and Des Moines's screens paralleled the dominant national film culture, the similarity of Iowans' movie tastes to the national trends remains doubtful. In the 1990s, when Des Moines movie fans could choose what to see in home video shops, their taste did not seem to replicate national trends. However, further investigation is certainly needed to

elaborate on whether and how Des Moines audience preferences have been similar to or different from the broader U.S. pattern over the years.

Regarding the Varsity's survival, these early stages of my research suggest that the Varsity's success in surviving the changing movie business from the 1950s through today was grounded in a deliberate decision to cultivate and sell its pleasing community atmosphere. In particular, Mahon's personality and personalized attention to patrons, his selection of films, customer-based localized advertising, the decision to show considerably fewer trailers, and the absence of commercials before the show all presented a stark contrast to the overly packaged, impersonal feel of large corporate multiplexes.

Mahon witnessed the time when the sudden popularity of television and home-based entertainment seemed to threaten moviegoing; he reacted not as a passive observer but as someone who lived and breathed the movie industry during his entire life. Even as the Varsity kept a lid on the prices, especially on concessions, it remained financially viable by keeping its payroll low. Both Bev Mahon and his daughter, Denise, devoted extensive time to running the operation themselves, allowing a financial sustainability model very different from that of multiplexes and allowing the Des Moines Varsity to survive in a tough market for seventy-six years and counting.

The Varsity has carved out a distinct character for its business, even as the American movie business underwent radical changes since the 1930s. Its history encapsulates the larger story of America's independent movie theaters, a fascinating business and social history.

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